

BIG SOUTH FORK FOLKLIFE STUDY  
THE OLD-TIME RELIGION:  
THE RURAL CHURCHES OF THE BIG SOUTH FORK

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## SECTION I: THE LOCAL RELIGIOUS SYSTEM

### A. Introduction

The word "religion" has wide connotations. To anthropologists, it conveys a comprehensive, integrated system of belief, behavior, and symbolism oriented toward Man's relationship with the intangible components of his environment that are perceived as supernatural, and also with his fellow man in concrete society. Religion is derived from a culture's conception of its Universe, and could be described as a projective psychological system because it defines the forces that exist in that Universe and prescribes and sanctions idealized modes of human thought and conduct. In this sense, religion is a complex topic that challenges the specific categoric boundaries that are often used in presenting ethnography, and one that is difficult to treat adequately through generalizations, especially when one is dealing with an area like the Big South Fork, where religious beliefs and activity are characterized by a great amount of sectarianism and idiosyncrasy.

In the small independent churches around the Big South Fork, a unique brand of Protestantism continues to flourish, retaining the predominant theology and social values of an earlier age, as well as the intense emotion and fiery evangelism of the Great Revival that swept the Kentucky and Tennessee frontier during the early years of the 19th Century (see Boles, 1976). This "old-time religion" remains a very important part of the lives of many of the region's inhabitants, manifested in highly sincere, personal testimonies of faith and in patterns of behavior that will probably seem alien to many future visitors from outside the area.

Perhaps more so than any other part of its regional culture, religion in Appalachia (or in the rural South at large) has frequently been misunderstood and misrepresented. Perceiving it bizarre and inferior to mainstream

Christianity because of its conservatism, emotionalism, and informality, some writers have painted Appalachia as a crazy quilt of strange competing sects, contradictory fundamentalist church doctrines, and peculiar heterodox beliefs and practices. Sources such as Weller (1965), Finney (1969), Gerrard (1970), Surface (1971), and Kerr (1978) all reflect the ethnocentrism of outside observers who have been unable to transcend their own theological biases in describing mountain religion, a problem that Loyal Jones (1976, 1977a) has expounded upon.

This section of the Folklife Report will provide an introduction to the religious beliefs and behavior that one encounters in the Big South Fork, describing these traditions as they survive today, and showing how they differ from those of mainstream American Protestantism without making them seem unduly exotic. We will begin by setting down some general characteristics that hold true for the area interdenominationally, <sup>and</sup> then examine the theological bases of the major orders of faith that are represented there. Finally, we will look at various components of the Big South Fork's religious system as they are expressed in the local folk culture.

#### B. General Characteristics of the Religious System

In their established theological leaning, the Big South Fork's inhabitants are exclusively Protestant. The Roman Catholic and Judaic faiths are wholly unrepresented, as are any organized non-Judeo-Christian religions. Collectively, the various local Baptist groups comprise the denominational majority, accounting for perhaps as many as 65% of the region's churches. Holiness and Pentecostal churches make up an estimated 25%, and the Church of Christ and related sects about 5%. The remaining 5% includes a handful of different Protestant bodies: Methodists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons, and Jehovah's

Witnesses.

This chapter's emphasis will be on the local religion expressed through the rural churches of the area, the ones that still cling to a religious system that is less apparent among the more mainstream-oriented "establishment" churches of Oneida, Jamestown, Whitley City, and Monticello. Before exploring this system further and delving deeper into the doctrines and historical backgrounds of the region's more important orders of faith, I should first specify which segments of the local population the following material does or does not typify, and then mention some qualities that cut across denominational boundaries and are generally characteristic of the Big South Fork's Protestantism on the whole.

The religious system to be discussed here is most strongly retained among the older native generations, and it is indelibly associated with a world view that is now fading from the region. Founded on a conceptual explanation of the Universe that was once far more prevalent than it is today, it lingers on in the minds and beliefs of those who were born and grew up as a part of it.

Even if these descriptions are much less clearly applicable to the Big South Fork's young people, and even if quite a number of the more "progressive" youth of Oneida or Jamestown might best be called agnostic, this is not to imply that the old-time religion no longer persists. On the contrary, it is evident at least to some degree among many of the region's younger residents, particularly those of rural background, and there are many who believe in it as fervently as their parents and grandparents. The beliefs and values of the younger generation, of course, have been far more influenced by the popular media, and local teenagers show some acquaintance with many of today's pop-culture spiritual fads--transcendental meditation, Eastern mysticism, astrology, parapsychology,

occultism, and the like--albeit with less of the diversity and following that one encounters among more urbanized youth in other parts of America. By and large, however, the old-time religion appears to gradually be losing its relevance to younger members of the local population, and if today's acculturative trends continue, we might predict that the decline of its traditional religious system will become increasingly more evident as the Big South Fork becomes less removed from the country's economic and cultural mainstream.

### C. The Independent Nature of Local Sects

Turning now to the religious system itself, the first characteristic that may seem unusual to visitor from outside the area is the autonomy of many of the Big South Fork's churches. These churches--and this is true of rural Appalachian churches in general--would more aptly be classified as sects. They are small, both physically and in terms of congregation size, and they are often not united by any officially standardized body of belief and ritual, nor affiliated with any larger regional church bureaucracy like the Southern Baptist Convention. (There are exceptions: the Big South Fork's Missionary Baptists, a number of its United Baptists, and some of its Pentecostal Holiness Churches of God do subscribe to denominational organizations. This is also true of the more mainstream churches of Oneida, Jamestown, Whitley City, and Monticello, and of the local religious minority groups--the Mormans, Jehovah's Witnesses, et al.) For these same reasons, they also tend to be congregational churches, in that the church is democratically governed by the congregation itself rather than by an episcopal or presbyterian hierarchy. The congregation chooses, and to an extent controls the performance of, its own minister, and also regulates its members' conduct outside of church.

(Some clarification of terms is necessary here, since conventional

connotations are not quite relevant in this case. "Church," as used here,  
will refer simply to the actual church building or to its congregation;  
"denomination" will mean the local manifestation of a particular order of  
faith, without implying the presence of an overruling ecclesiastical  
bureaucracy, since, in this special context, one often does not exist.)

The Big South Fork's churches owe much of their independent nature to their history. Later, we will see how two important orders of faith in the region today, those represented by the Holiness and Pentecostal churches, and by the Church of Christ, originated as offshoots of established mainstream denominations. The Baptists are another story (and a rather complicated one in itself which will subsequently be told in detail). Initially, they were products of the colonial Puritan-Separatist movements, and can be traced to English and Welsh Baptist sects. Jones (1977b) tells how today's Appalachian Baptist groups descended from congregations who moved into the mountains seeking a religious freedom that was unavailable in the state-religion-dominated colonies. Contrary to what popular writers like Surface (1971) have said, historians like Scalf (1972) indicate that independent Baptist churches were present in eastern Kentucky (and, we might surmise, in eastern Tennessee also) as early as the beginning of the 1800s. Since that time, they have splintered, reunited, and fragmented again, but their natal separatist spirit continues to survive and explains their disdain for established church bureaucracies.

#### D. Religious Conservatism and Fundamentalism

The autonomy of these churches has also been enhanced by the conservatism of the local religious system itself, and of the regional culture in general. As part of a society that valued tradition and tried hard to resist passing fads and styles in belief and worship, the Big South Fork's rural

churches have maintained its old-time religion so staunchly that it might justifiably be described as anachronistic, since it preserves tenacious elements that are over two hundred years old and seem out of place in the present-day context.

Religious fundamentalism has also reinforced the local sects' basic independent nature, as well as being a cause for their proliferation. Around the Big South Fork, the Bible has traditionally been accepted as the Supreme Authority and the irrefutable Word of God, divinely-inspired and an inerrant model for conduct and worship. Many of the more conservative churches, irrespective of denomination, sanction only the King James Version, rejecting all of the more recent, updated translations as invalid. Religious beliefs and practices are legitimized by strict, literal interpretations of Scripture. But if the Bible is taken as an explicit guide to salvation, in many of its passages it simultaneously remains a great mystery. In an often-quoted verse (Isaiah 55:8), God said "My thoughts are not your thoughts; neither are your ways my ways," and around the Big South Fork, His word is widely open to individual speculation and interpretation. Good preachers have a gift for this, and over the years, conflicting interpretations of Scripture have divided many community churches, even if the points of contention seem less important to their congregations today.

It requires much time, patience, and inquiry to discern the order that underlies what at first encounter may appear to be a patchwork of often seemingly insignificant and contradictory beliefs, all based on fundamentalist interpretations of Biblical passages. In this respect, the Big South Fork's rural churches typify what Clark (1955) called legalistic ideological systems, ones that are defined by specifically-stated codes of belief and behavior and rely on concrete acts and things as qualifiers.

Each independent rural church essentially represents its own. These belief codes can also be (and around the Big South Fork, often are) expressed negatively, in terms of what a specific sect is against rather than what it stands for.

But this is not the time for detail. In the following section, we will take a closer look at some of these church doctrines and examine what they do and do not believe in. For now, to state on the general level a few beliefs that transcend local denominational boundaries, we can turn to Kerr (1978), who, in describing the fundamentalist inclination of Appalachian religion, identified four important points of doctrine that are taken on their written face value, in addition to the basic conviction about the literal accuracy of the Bible. These are the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ, Adult Believer Baptism, Total Salvation, and the Second Coming of Christ. Among the Big South Fork's rural churches, they are accepted universally.

The region's basic fundamentalism has not only encouraged differing ideas about the implications of Scripture, but it also permeates down to the level of personal religious belief. It continues to stimulate a prestigious amount of reading, meditation, and speculation about God's Word among laymen. One frequently hears religious topics crop up in the everyday dialogue of local Christians, and conversants are usually prepared to offer their own thoughts about particularly meaningful Biblical passages, as well as recounting personal religious experiences or delivering their own testimonies of faith.

Obviously, this is more than just a "Sunday morning" religion, and it is certainly not a passive religion. For those who believe and practice it, the old-time religion is a total experience that fills their daily lives and occupies a subliminal part of their consciousness even when it is not a preoccupation. It finds expression on occasions and during day-to-day



activities that might not seem overtly religious. Of course, nowhere is it more highly apparent than during local church services.

#### E. Informality

These services' informality may seem unusual to some outsiders, but <sup>informality</sup> is an important quality of the local religious system, one that can be interpreted as an outgrowth of the basic fundamentalism which encourages and emphasizes individual religious experience. Even though church meetings around the Big South Fork do not adhere to a printed program like some mainstream churches, they do follow a general format that still remains fluid enough to accommodate a lengthy sermon, if the preacher is "seized by the Spirit" and wants to expound upon an important topic, or to provide time for individual prayer requests, hymn-singing, song-leading, dedications, or testimony.

What might seem impromptu to the casual observer is actually usually extemporaneous, but the air of spontaneity is a deliberate part of the church services. It functions on several levels. First of all, it makes the meeting interesting and entertaining; it occupies the participants' attention, and no doubt, keeps some attending church in anticipation that "something might happen tonight in the meeting." More importantly, it reinforces the congregation's solidarity by letting each member--even those who do not lead songs, request prayers, or testify--know that the church, as an organ of the religious system, is ever-ready to respond to the individual's spiritual needs.

This informality seems perfectly natural in its own context and it reflects the simple, unpretentious egalitarianism of the religious system in general. This is a religion that accepts the humanity of its followers; it is a religion where believers attest points of a sermon with shouts of

"Amen!" or "Praise God!" in a call-and-response pattern, where a baby's outburst of crying during a service will more likely be greeted with benign smiles rather than scowls, where latecomers or children leaving the congregation to go outdoors cause no interruption, where the visiting revival evangelist may pause for a moment in deference to a passing coal truck. As well as prescribing, as all religions do, how its followers should be, it also is supportingly tolerant of the way they presently are, and willing to bear with surrounding circumstances.

#### F. Egalitarianism

Another dimension of the informality of the local religious system is evident in its prevalent sense of egalitarianism. It is believed that any man (but not any woman, as we will later see) is essentially as capable of discerning the right path to God and of being called to preach as any other; that every person has his or her right to speak or testify in church and as much right as anyone else to be heard. This is why, when a congregation begins to hear prayer requests or testimony, these activities will continue until every person who wishes to speak has had his or her chance. These principles also function as social levelers within the church and make outside distinctions of individual or family wealth and status irrelevant in the eyes of God or in the eyes of fellow church members. The simple architecture of church buildings also reflects this egalitarianism. The absence of imposing houses of worship bears witness to the idea that churches should not try to "one up" one another, and it acknowledges that, in spite of interdenominational squabbles over Scriptural doctrine, they are more or less equal to one another in the paths to salvation that they represent.

#### G. Emotionalism

Formal ritual in local church services is minimal. In contrast to

~~their own religious backgrounds, outside visitors may consider the informality,~~  
lack of orthodoxy, and overt emotionalism of these services strange. Following Clark's (1955) classification, the Big South Fork's religious system is more subjective than objective, in that it stresses individual feeling and almost mystical emotional experience much more than formalized ritual and symbolism. In this region, religious fundamentalism and emotionalism go hand-in-hand, and emotional church behavior is interpreted as evidence of direct contact with God. Emotion is expressed freely and is as much a natural component of church gatherings as their informality, although the degree of emotion varies in intensity from denomination to denomination. It is highly apparent in hymn-singing, preaching, prayer, testimony, and conversion experiences, as well as in the jerking, dancing, falling down, and other motor phenomena associated with Holiness-Pentecostal meetings.

#### H. Other-worldliness

Another characteristic of the local religion is a pervasive sense of "other-worldliness," although this trait also varies from congregation to congregation. It is reflected in a transcendental attitude and skepticism toward worldly institutions; the earthly life is seen only as a preparation for the everlasting spiritual life. The vanities and pleasures of the real world are considered incongruent with a life guided by the Holy Spirit. Within this belief system, necessity is a virtue and poverty almost a prerequisite for salvation. Other-worldliness is also embodied in the structural and decorative simplicity of the Big South Fork's country churches, since, to their members, the church, like the Kingdom of God, is something not of this world and the church building only a place to meet. As Jones (1976, 1977b) noted, 20th Century ideas about religious activism and the Social Gospel are completely alien to these Christians.

Searching for an explanation for this other-worldly quality, one could turn to a fundamentalist interpretation of Biblical verses, particularly Ecclesiastes 1:2-3 ("Vanity of vanities. . . all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?") and John 18:36, where Jesus said "My kingdom is not of this world." But it also reveals something deeper about the nature of the people who affirm this belief. It is something that cannot easily be interpreted. Popular writers (e.g., Weller, 1965; Gerrard, 1970; Erikson, 1976) have pointed out that, in an unresolvable cycle of cause-and-effect, this other-worldly dimension of Appalachian religion is both conditioned by and serves to influence and validate the fatalism that they see as intrinsic to the mountaineers. Like most stereotypes, this idea probably contains a shred of truth, but it lacks depth as an explanatory model and actually says little about how important religion is to inhabitants of the Big South Fork or of the Appalachian region in general, or how it helps them confront the difficulties of their present world.

#### I. Perfectionism

Two other characteristics need to be mentioned, and by looking at them, we can better understand the reasons underlying the air of other-worldliness that many local Christians try to maintain. It could be said that the Big South Fork's old-time religious system is both perfectionistic and charismatic, although, once again, these qualities are less evident among some congregations than among others. Perfectionism refers to a doctrine professing that after an experience of emotional regeneration, an individual is capable of attaining a state of being in his or her present life that is free not only from sinful deeds but also from sinful thought and desire. This belief parallels the teachings of other important religions. It is essentially what Buddhists believe characterizes the state of nirvana and

detachment from worldly desires, and it also conforms to the condition that Roman Catholics believe can be achieved only through monastic asceticism and meditation. In the Big South Fork area, this experience would be called "sanctification" or "holiness," and it is particularly important to those groups that call themselves Holiness churches. Others are less evident in espousing this belief, although most local Christians would agree that the state of sanctification can truly be attained. However, instead of receiving this second act of grace after a long, long period of spiritual growth, local inhabitants believe that it can be reached almost instantaneously through the intervention of the Holy Spirit if someone believes strongly enough to induce an intense, blinding emotional experience. Writing of this, Gerrard (1970) said that sanctification "is frequently preceded by an emotional upheaval during which the individual, awakened from spiritual indifference, agonizingly repents his (or her) sins."

#### J. Charismaticism

Charismatic religions believe that certain devout individuals, such as those who have achieved sanctification, can be touched by the Holy Spirit and blessed with spiritual gifts, such as prophecy and faith-healing. Most Christians around the Big South Fork would acknowledge the existence of spiritual gifts, and anyone would immediately say that good preachers possess such a talent, but the region's Pentecostal churches, which are a branch of the Holiness Movement, have made these divinely-inspired gifts their central focus. They believe that the charismata represent a third level of spiritual experience, beyond sanctification, that a person can attain. Pentecostal activities involving such phenomena are wildly emotional and in certain sects sometimes approach the bizarre when they feel that the Holy Spirit is encouraging them to indulge in potentially harmful acts as a test of their faith. In the following section, we will examine these unusual

groups and their beliefs in greater detail.

## SECTION II: IMPORTANT THEOLOGICAL SUBDIVISIONS

### A. Baptists

From our preliminary look at the old-time religious system of the Big South Fork, we have gained some understanding of what it is about; now, on this canvas of generalities, we can begin to paint an illustration of how particular denominations evolved from this background. We will start first of all with the Baptists, since they represent the largest local denomination.

Collectively, the Big South Fork's rural Baptist churches would outnumber all others put together. Like most Baptist groups throughout Appalachia, they differ in several respects from the mainstream Baptist churches which the reader may already be familiar with. The independent nature of many of the local Baptist churches is unique, and their religious conservatism and fundamentalism are also important characteristics. Even if the Baptist congregations that are represented in the Big South Fork appear more or less conservative when compared to one another, in general, they still stand somewhat to the right of most mainstream Baptists. Writing about the independent Appalachian Baptist churches, Jones (1977b) referred to them as "Old Baptists" because they have maintained certain beliefs for two hundred years or more and have made a great effort to avoid passing fads and styles in belief and worship. He also labeled them "Radical Baptists" because they go straight to the primary source, the Scriptures, for their authority and do not practice what is not spelled out in them.

Despite their differences, Baptists of the Big South Fork hold convictions typical of a large portion of Baptists elsewhere as well as beliefs that also persist among other Protestant groups in the area. Clark (1937)

identified five universals that he called the "distinctive message" of Baptist churches everywhere: (1) the absolute supremacy of the Scriptures as a norm for faith and practice, (2) rejection of infant baptism as contrary to Scripture, (3) absolute freedom of conscience, (4) salvation and spiritual rebirth as conditions for church membership, and (5) complete immersion as the only valid form of baptism.

There are four orders of Baptists in the Big South Fork area. Their theological differences can best be understood if these churches are pictured as a continuum with its opposite ends representing two very distinct doctrinal orientations. In the broadest sense, the local Baptists can be classified on a more-or-less basis into two categories, which constitute the two poles of our continuum. The first are the Calvinist, or predestinarian Baptists, who are the more conservative faction and hold to strict Scriptural interpretations. They are represented locally by the churches that call themselves Separate Baptists and United Baptists. (The ultra-conservative Primitive or "Hardshell" Baptist sects do not survive in the area.) The others are the Arminian, or freewill Baptists, who are the more liberal division and include the Freewill and Missionary Baptist churches in the Big South Fork.

The predestinarian doctrine maintains that there are some individuals who are predestined for salvation and others who are not. This is legitimized by divine ordinance, and a person is believed to be incapable of entering the Kingdom of Heaven by any volition except divine will. The Big South Fork's Separate and United Baptist churches are traditionally predestinarian. They follow a very literal, almost legalistic interpretation of the Scriptures, renouncing musical instruments, dancing, revivals, both home and foreign missions, seminary training for ministers, and Sunday schools all because they are not explicitly mentioned in the Bible.

The Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists (various authors, 1958) traces

the origin of this branch of the Baptist faith. It emerged in the mid-1700s as a separation movement from the dominant Congregational Church of New England. A subsequent split divided them into rival groups called Regular (or Old Regular) and Separate Baptists. A partial reunion between the two was accomplished in 1786, and for the most part, the name "United Baptist" has replaced the two older labels, although they still persist in isolated places like the Big South Fork. Regular Baptists appear to no longer be locally present, and several former Regular Baptist churches, such as the Old Barger Church near Allardt, have been reconstituted as Freewill churches. There are still a number of churches that identify themselves as Separate. The Separate Baptist congregations are all locally autonomous and have no affiliation with the Southern Baptist Convention. The United Baptists also do not support the Southern Baptist Convention, but an organization of United Baptist churches, the United Baptists of Tennessee, has existed since 1800. It is comprised of four regional associations, one of which is New River and includes the United Baptist churches around the Big South Fork.

The local Freewill and Missionary Baptist churches, which subscribe to the Arminian, or freewill doctrine, occupy the liberal end of the local Baptist ideological continuum. One must remember, however, that this is only relatively speaking and that they would still be considered quite conservative to many of today's more mainstream Baptists. These churches believe that every person has an equal opportunity to be saved if they accept Jesus Christ, and that this commitment rests<sup>s</sup> entirely on the individual's free will. They generally belong to the Southern Baptist Convention, and permit the use of musical instruments in worship services and support revivals, missions, Sunday schools, and seminary-trained ministers, although they still emphasize the divine call to preach.

The freewill doctrine and beliefs, in fact, read almost like the exact



opposite of those of the Calvinist Baptist churches. This is not surprising since they grew out of a reaction against predestinarianism and everything it represented. The Freewill Movement came to life in 18th Century New England as a radical split from the Calvinist doctrine, and it eventually penetrated isolated rural hinterlands like the Big South Fork, where it divided many existing churches. In the following century, Baptist churches were again divided over the issue of foreign missions, a schism that established the Missionary Baptist churches as the most recent offshoot to emerge in the Big South Fork. As yet, Missionary Baptist churches exist only east of New River and have never penetrated into rural Fentress County. The mainstream-oriented Southern Baptist churches of Oneida, Jamestown, Whitley City, Monticello, and elsewhere follow a doctrine that is essentially the same as that of the rural Missionary Baptists.

To the rural Baptist churches of the Big South Fork today, this chronicle of religious divisions has far less relevance than it did during the past century. In the past, these Baptist churches have grown, ameba-like, and squabbled and splintered over seemingly-insignificant theological questions or Biblical interpretations. They still sometimes criticize and try to draw converts from each other, but they remain more alike in the similarities they share than they differ from each other in the points they disagree on. Few, if any, still take these natal issues seriously, and local Baptists--even those like Joe Hicks of Armathwaite, who preached in local churches for 45 years--acknowledge that there is little present difference between the Baptist churches of the region. For what it is worth, however, this history accounts for why there are so many Baptist churches in the area. It helps explain the origin of the labels they use to identify themselves, and gives us a hypothesis about the small, rural "two-church" communities like Mt. Helen/Honey Creek and Black Creek (West Robbins).

## B. Holiness and Pentecostals

Like the Big South Fork's various Baptist sects, the local manifestations of the Holiness-Pentecostal faith can also be better understood through an ordinal arrangement. These churches are all products of the National Holiness Movement, an offshoot of the Methodist Church that emerged in the 1850s. The Holiness "middle of the roaders," which include the churches that identify themselves as Holiness or Apostolic, but not as Pentecostal, believe that following salvation and redemption, the faithful can receive a second act of grace, or a "second blessing." This sanctification, or "holiness" is described by Clark (1937, 1955) as "a higher experience of emotional character that eradicates natural depravity or inbred sin." This belief is also known as the Doctrine of Christian Perfection, and, as noted earlier, it is essentially what the Roman Catholic Church teaches can be attained through monastic asceticism and meditation.

The Pentecostal churches, or the "Holy Ghost People," represent the left wing of the Holiness continuum. Pentecostalism originated in the early 20th Century, and in the Big South Fork region, it includes those churches bearing the names Pentecostal Holiness, Church of God, Church of God of Prophecy, and Assembly of God. Pentecostal followers emphasize the power of the third member of the Christian Trinity, the Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit, and of a climactic "third blessing" or charisma. They maintain that after a believer has attained the state of holiness and is freed from sin and evil thought, he or she can be filled by the Holy Ghost, "baptized in the spirit," and receive spiritual gifts that include the powers of glossolalia ("speaking in tongues"), prophesy, faith-healing ability, and other phenomena.

Holiness and Pentecostal churches can also be distinguished from other churches in the Big South Fork by characteristics other than theological. Although their services roughly follow the same format as the Baptists',

they can run as long as three hours and are extremely emotional, even by local standards. This unrepressed emotionalism is evident in their singing, preaching, prayer, and testimony, and is particularly and understandably obvious in the Pentecostals' manifestations of the charismata. Their church music is also distinctive, since Holiness and Pentecostal churches universally use guitars and tambourines to accompany their singing and rarely possess pianos or organs. Their lively, exuberant church singing, along with the ecstatic spontaneous dancing and other behavior that occurs when believers are filled with the Holy Ghost, has earned them the nickname "Holy Rollers." Generally more uptempo and "gospel" oriented, their music lacks the stately solemnness of the old-line Baptists' acapella congregational singing.

To certain Pentecostal sects in this part of the country, the charismatic spiritual powers also include the ability to handle poisonous reptiles and fire, and to drink strychnine and other deadly substances without being harmed. (Despite the fact that these activities result in several fatalities each year in the Appalachian parts of Kentucky, Tennessee, and West Virginia, the followers who adhere to these beliefs usually refuse medical attention if they do happen to be bitten or injured.) There is a small body of scholarly literature concerning these cults, which eschews the sensationalism that the Pentecostal snake-handlers have received from the popular media: see Schwarz (1960), La Barre (1962), Gerrard (1968), Kane (1974a, 1974b, 1978), and also Daugherty (1976), which though unscientific, provides a very humanistic discussion of the beliefs and behavior of these unusual groups. Evidence from Kane (personal communication), who has conducted the most detailed investigations of their practices, indicated that sects of this sort exist in Scott County, Tennessee, and Oscar Blevins, a local informant who collects rattlesnakes and copperheads to sell to a biological laboratory, says that he is occasionally approached by individuals interested in obtaining them for reli-

gious purposes, even though he has always refused to comply.

Although this is not the proper context for an extended discussion of the Appalachian snake-handlers and related phenomenonists--and the interested reader is urged to consult the references cited above--a few qualifying statements about them should be made since they are present in the Big South Fork area. First of all, it should be understood that these sects are not common, and to place them in their proper theological perspective, one might say that if the Pentecostals constitute the left wing of the Holiness Movement, then the snake-handlers et al. comprise its radical fringe. Their behavior is to them a supreme act of faith, a sacrament which, like several of their other charismatic manifestations, is based on a fundamentalist interpretation of Christ's parting admonition to his disciples, found in the Gospel of Mark (King James Version) 16:15-18:

Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned. And these signs shall follow them that believe: in my name shall they cast out devils; they shall speak with new tongues; they shall take up serpents, and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands on the sick, and they shall recover.

(The fire-handling belief is taken from three Biblical passages: Isaiah 43:2, Daniel 3:20-27, and Hebrews 11:34.)

Kane (1974b) cautions against dismissing such cult behavior as psychologically aberrant, and goes on to explain that aside from their extraordinary behavior in this one particular context, these people are essentially normal individuals, well-adjusted by local standards and otherwise undistinguishable from other members of their communities who do not take part in their unusual rites. He argues that the religious acts themselves are not evidence of wild, random idiosyncrasy, but that they are actually stylized, controlled, and conventionalized; that they represent an institutionalized, transmissible system of ritual and belief which--after the outsider recovers from the initial

shock of encountering it--can be appreciated as a fascinating cultural manifestation.

Because their practices are illegal, these Pentecostal snake-handlers maintain an underground profile; because they neither proselytize nor encourage non-believers to participate, their behavior poses no hazard except to themselves, and they are best left respectfully alone.

### C. Church of Christ and Related Groups

Other religious groups in the Big South Fork area identify themselves as the Disciples of Christ, Church of Christ, or as Christian Churches, which will be used here as a generic label for all local churches of this sort, since they share a common history. Even though they do not claim a large local following, these churches are still worthy of mention. One, the Church of Christ, is a particularly vocal minority which, during the time that our fieldwork was being conducted in 1979, was engaged in an open dispute with some of the less conservative Baptists around Oneida over the use of musical instruments in gospel and church singing (which the Church of Christ opposes) and other theological issues.

Like the Big South Fork's Baptists and Holiness-Pentecostal people, these Christian Churches share related points of history and dogma among themselves. According to Hooker (1933), they can be traced back to an offshoot of the Presbyterians around the time of the Great Revival, and were fermented by the same controversies that divided other Protestant denominations during the first half of the 19th Century: the question of "free grace" or freewill, the anti-mission schism, and the fundamentalist movement to restore the Church to the literal teachings of the Bible. This fundamentalist doctrine of these Christian Churches, which proscribes any belief or practice not explicitly mentioned in the Bible, is often stated as "where the Scriptures speak, we speak; where they are silent, we are silent," and it is sometimes

~~known as Cambellism, after Thomas and Alexander Campbell, who originated it.~~

Described by Jones (1977a), the earliest of the Christian Churches, the Disciples of Christ, emerged in the 1840s. But before long, the Disciples themselves began to disagree over just what the Scriptures said or didn't say. In the early 1900s, one body separated and formed the Church of Christ, and subsequent issues caused further segmentation. Known simply as Christian Churches, these congregations, like the parent Church of Christ and like most of the Big South Fork's rural churches, are locally independent and have no central headquarters.

### SECTION III: RELIGIOUS DOMAINS IN THE FOLKLIFE

#### A. Introduction

With these theological foundations that we now have in mind, we can begin to consider the role that religion plays in the daily lives of the Big South Fork's people and how it functions in its general cultural context. As noted earlier, religion here is not an on-and-off manifestation, but a fundamental part of the lives of a large portion of the local population, something seriously believed in, lived, and experienced. Among the region's older generations, their Protestant faith strongly influences how people view human conduct, attitudes, and ultimate goals in life.

"Religion," wrote Boles (1976), "is a difficult concept to define; at the most abstract level, it is a series of symbols which help explain the world and give meaning to life." He continued:

In addition to shaping a person's comprehension of his (or her) society, religious symbols, because they carry with them certain values and truths which must be realized in the believer's life-style, help shape how a person responds to his (or her) world. Clearly the social environment, as perceived by the believer, influences his (or her) behavior.

At the beginning of this chapter, I explained that religion consists of

more than Sunday church attendance, and involves a whole complex of belief, behavior, and symbolism that permeates many human activities. Those pervasive, penetrating elements of religion that figure in everyday life constitute the local religious culture. It would be an encyclopedic task to chronicle every aspect of this religious culture, since it saturates the total culture so comprehensively. But religion is much more evident in certain cultural contexts than it is among others. In this section, we will briefly examine six cultural domains where religion predominates and which are essential to a broad understanding of the religious culture of the Big South Fork. These areas will be: (1) religious belief, (2) religious social/communal aspects, (3) religious behavior, (4) religious symbolism, (5) religious music, and (6) religious practitioners.

To accomplish this task, I will rely on the anthropologist's device of ethnography, where a composite, all-inclusive cultural description is fashioned from the material gained from participation, observation, and talking to several or many informants. The portrayal of religion in the Big South Fork that is presented here was drawn from visiting several rural churches and from material gathered from interviews with twelve different informants. The principal informants were Anna "Aunt Annie" Troxell (Rocky Branch, Kentucky; b. 1889), Arnold Kimbrell (Armathwaite, Tennessee; b. 1900), Joe Hicks (Armathwaite, Tennessee; b. 1899), Crit King (Whitley City, Kentucky; b. 1906), Alvin Perry (Smithtown, Kentucky; b. 1910), Rebecca Watson (Beech Grove, Kentucky; b. 1898?), and Oscar Blevins (Scott County, Tennessee; b. 1911). Three radio evangelists, Chuckie Duncan (Robbins, Tennessee), Chris Day (Oneida, Tennessee), and Elsie Marcum (Helenwood, Tennessee), and two gospel singers from the area, Judy Tipton Eacret (Jamestown, Tennessee) and Leland Sexton (Huntsville, Tennessee) supplied other appropriate material.

Since it is a generalized picture drawn from so many different subjects, this ethnographic sketch cannot be said to characterize every church-goer in the region. As a composite, it applies chiefly to the Baptist faith that is represented in the area, because ~~this~~ this was the religious background of all but one of the informants. That this account be presented as typical of the region as a whole is more or less justified, though, since, as we have seen, the majority of Christians living around the Big South Fork are Baptists.

#### B. Religious Belief

Religious belief, the cognitive/affective dimension of religion, seems a logical topic with which to begin this survey. In its broadest implication, it would be impossible and far beyond the scope of this report to try to document every conceivable religious belief held by inhabitants of the Big South Fork. All I will attempt to do here is to record the more important ones that comprise the basis of local theology. These are essentially those shared by Protestants everywhere, and they have already been described to some extent in the two preceding sections.

As explained earlier, religious beliefs here are generally extrapolated from fundamentalist interpretations of the King James Bible, and this belief in its literal accuracy forms the foundation for those that follow. God is conceived as masculine, and seems to conform more closely to the Old Testament's characterization of God as the Creator and Stern Judge of Mankind, than to the New Testament's personification of God as the Loving Father of the Human Race. God is seen both as one and three entities, which consist of the Christian Trinity of God the Father, the Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost. The local religion recognizes no pantheon of saints or other spiritual deities. (As noted in



Section II, sanctification is seen as a state that any sincere believer is capable of attaining.)

To the faithful, Man is God's creation, and lives for the purpose of glorifying God. The church is God's community of believers. Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, is Man's Savior, and his teachings, the model for human behavior to one another. Repentance and salvation from sin are essential to one's entry into Heaven, the Kingdom of God, after death. Salvation can only be attained through the grace of God and recognition of Jesus as one's personal savior. Hell is the place reserved in the afterlife for those who do not accept Christ. Salvation entails spiritual rebirth (hence the appellation "born-again Christian") and baptism--by complete immersion of the body underwater--is the final requisite for salvation. Baptism is a symbol of God's forgiveness and the washing away of previous sin and the simultaneous baptism in the Holy Spirit.

(There is some disagreement among local Baptist sects over what can happen to a person following salvation. Some believe that "salvation is enough" and that afterwards, "you can backslide all you want" but remain saved. Others believe that once saved, an individual can still be lost again through sin.)

Death is seen only as an intermediary stage between the earthly life and the eternal spiritual life. All people, living and dead, await the Last Days and the Second Coming of Christ, when he will return to deliver our final judgement. In nearly all cemeteries around the Big South Fork, the dead have been interred facing east, so they will be awakened by the sunrise on Judgement Day. After the Divine Judgement, supposedly, those saved will be reunited with their loved ones, and will dwell in Heaven happily ever after.

### C. Religious Social/Communal Aspects

Religious services are a vital part of life for the region's churchgoers. People identify with a particular church, and in the rural hamlets around the Big South Fork, the neighborhood churches establish community boundaries in the absence of precisely-defined political township limits. In earlier decades, the neighborhood schools shared this function, but because of present-day county school consolidation, the churches today perform alone in this capacity. In larger settlements with more than one church, such as Armathwaite and Allardt, the churches define segments within the communities. In other neighborhoods, like Mt. Helen/Honey Creek or Black Creek (West Robbins), residents may attend either of their two churches interchangeably.

Besides establishing outside boundaries for the rural communities, the churches also strengthen integration and solidarity within these circles. Church itself is a social function and is the social highlight of the week for many persons. This concept of the neighborhood united into a community of believers is reinforced not only by singing and worshipping together at weekly or semi-weekly church meetings, but also through periodic gatherings like baptisms and funerals and special scheduled events like revivals, gospel sings, and annual church homecomings. Church rituals like the Right Hand of Fellowship and customs like congregation members addressing one another as "Brother. . ." and "Sister. . ." help promote this fusion. Community spirit was also reflected in the cooperative work projects of former times and in the surviving practices of caring for the sick, assisting the bereaved, and visiting church members who are in the hospital.

Another function of the churches that is less evident today is social control. In former times, the church was a strong force in maintaining the rectitude of its members. Individuals could be "churched"--suspended or

voted out of the church entirely--for moral infractions such as drunkenness, inattendance, dishonesty, profanity, heresy, gambling, dancing, fornication, adultery, and so forth. Meetings to hear charges and determine guilt were conducted like courts, with accusers, accused, and witnesses all given their chance to be heard. These took place at regular monthly church business meetings, which usually have been held on Saturdays. The threat of expulsion and consequent social ostracism was great enough to keep all but the most incorrigible members in line.

#### D. Religious Behavior

What constitutes or does not constitute religious behavior in a system like the Big South Fork's religious culture, a total experience and a presence occupying much of its adherents' conscious thought? This is not a question that can immediately be answered. The church has always been a powerful moral influence on its members' behavior, even if the past few decades have cost it some of its sway. Since our present context does not permit us the depth to explore this topic thoroughly, in this section we will concentrate only of the formal or overtly religious activities of those who attend church in the region--church services, conversions, baptisms, and revivals.

#### Church meetings and rituals

Church meetings are always held on Sunday mornings and usually on Sunday and Wednesday evenings as well. Some country churches begin their observance of the Sabbath by meeting on Saturday night. Other churches may reserve Saturday evening for the monthly business meeting. During winter months, churches may alter their schedule and only meet, say, every other Sunday night, but the Sunday morning services are rarely ever changed. If the church holds a Sunday school, these meetings are conducted on Sunday

morning prior to the regular service. One interesting difference between the rural churches of the Big South Fork and those of the mainstream is that here, Sunday school is not something primarily "for the kids." Adults may participate as actively as children and use their Sunday school session for Bible reading and theological discussion. Since some local Baptist groups have traditionally not supported Sunday schools, the Sunday school may be disguised under the label "Bible Study Class."

In some rural churches, male members of the congregation still sit on one side of the church and female members on the other. Everybody occupies a place that is informally designated as his or her seat. At the Beech Grove United Baptist Church in McCreary County, the men sit on the right and the women on the left.

Some words have already been spent (see page 8) about the informality of the Big South Fork's church meetings, but it should again be emphasized that despite their informality, church services do proceed according to a plan, albeit sometimes loosely specified. They usually run between 1½-2 hours long, and always start with hymn-singing, either by the congregation or by the choir, if the church has an organized one. The music continues after the pastor imparts a few words of welcome to the congregation and to any newcomers who might be present. This is usually followed by prayer requests and then by a period of prayer with everyone praying aloud simultaneously and the pastor "praying over" the congregation. Preaching comes next. After the sermon, an offering will be collected for the church. Then there may be time for testimony and perhaps more prayer requests and singing before the final announcements and the closing prayer.

There are a few rituals that are sometimes part of the church meetings. One of these is the Right Hand of Church Fellowship, which seems to exclusively be part of Baptist services and followed the preaching at both local

Baptist churches that the Folklife Study visited. While the congregation sings a hymn, everyone goes around the room shaking everybody else's right hand. Another ritual is the Altar Call, which is more common among the Holiness-Pentecostal churches and usually occurs near the end of their services. The Baptists practice it too, if less frequently. After preaching, if the meeting has reached a particularly high peak of emotional excitement, the pastor may say, "Let's have an Altar Call." Everyone then moves to the front of the church, toward the pulpit, kneels and prays at the "altar." Another ritual, which the Baptists call Lord's Supper, is practiced at least once a year but is not a regular part of church services. It is essentially what other Christian groups call Sacrament, Eucharist, or Holy Communion, and it is usually reserved for right around Easter in commemoration of the Last Supper. Here, members of the church ceremonially partake of small cracker wafers and grape juice, which are intended to represent the bread and wine shared by Christ and his disciples.

#### Conversions and Baptisms

Late in the service, usually just before the closing prayer, churches observe the Open Doors of the Church, which is their invitation to come forward and join the church. It occurs while the congregation sings a hymn, which will usually be a very familiar one ("Just As I Am" seems to be the favorite invitation song.) dealing with the soul's triumphant victory over sin. Those who accept may be persons who belong to other churches and who have simply decided to transfer their membership, or they may be individuals who have had a conversion experience and are ready to publicly acknowledge Jesus Christ as their personal savior, to make this profession of faith, to be baptized, and to become part of the church. Conversion can occur at almost any age, and although it is not unusual for school-aged children to come forward and accept Jesus, converts most commonly are teen-

agers or young adults. Following his or her acceptance of Jesus in the church, a new convert may be questioned by a few of the church's deacons to verify whether or not this person has truly had a "born-again" experience.

Baptisms may be held regularly, usually monthly, but sometimes only as frequently as the need demands. Some of the more mainstream churches of the region hold baptisms in the church, using a bathtub-like contraption, but many of the rural churches continue to hold them out-of-doors in an actual flowing stream. A good deal of oral history confirms that in previous times large-scale baptisms were conducted under the railroad bridge at New River, and Clear Fork at the Burnt Mill Bridge is a popular spot for baptisms today. Total immersion of the body under water is considered the only valid form of baptism.

The writer chanced to come upon a baptism in progress at Burnt Mill Bridge in September, 1979, on a cloudy and not particularly warm Sunday afternoon. There were five persons being baptized and they and the preacher were standing waist-deep in the water with their hands joined to form a circle. A gospel quartet consisting of two guitarists and two singers sang while the baptism was carried out, and a crowd of 20 or so spectators--mostly adolescent girls in their pastel Sunday dresses--watched from the bridge. Each person in the river was taken in turn by the preacher and briefly held under the water.

According to the testimony of the informants in this study, footwashings are no longer practiced by churches in the Big South Fork region. This ritual ~~which~~ survives in some Appalachian churches (see Mullins and Hall, 1973; Reid, 1978), especially the Primitive Baptists and Old Regular Baptists, but sects of neither branch exist in the Big South Fork.

### Homecomings and Revivals

In activities such as homecomings and revivals, the church's role transcends religion. These functions are important because they also promote feelings of community among the participants. The church homecoming is actually more a social event than a religious event. Nearly every local church sponsors an annual one, which usually takes place during the months of July, August, or September. Homecomings bring back members of the church community who no longer live in the area. They involve a large potluck dinner on the church grounds immediately following the morning service. The dinner and related activity may continue well into the afternoon. Most churches have long outdoor tables and benches, often under a sheltered enclosure, on their premises for this purpose.

If the church belongs to a denomination that supports religious revivals, it will have at least one and often two a year. Sometimes these occur on a more-or-less regularly scheduled basis, but they are more likely to be held whenever a visiting evangelist can be contracted. Revivals are another social highlight of church community life because they bring out members who may have become lax in their attendance. Despite its social significance, the primary purpose of the revival is religious; besides bringing errant members back into the fold, it is also intended to rekindle and regenerate the religious fervor that deacons feel would begin to slip away if revivals weren't held regularly.

Today's revivals are directly descended from the great religious camp meetings of the early 1800s (see Boles, 1976). In earlier years, they were much more spontaneous affairs than they have now become. Revivals might begin impulsively, continue indefinitely until the enthusiasm began to wane, and feature a number of local preachers. Today, churches plan them usually to run for a week, from Sunday to following Sunday, and they enlist the aid

of hired outside evangelists who travel a circuit preaching at revivals, "putting the fear of the Lord back into people," and deriving most of their annual income from such activity.

Not only is the revival a social highlight and a period of religious regeneration; it is also good entertainment and it probably draws a number of its participants for this as much as either other reason. An accomplished revival preacher understands this part of his function and does his best to put on a good show. Revivals may also feature professional gospel singing groups which add to the diversion. When the preacher "really gets going" and the singing becomes vivacious, when the emotion runs high and the spirit is moving sinners in the congregation to come forward and accept Jesus, the revival is a thrilling experience to become engrossed in, as well as a great emotional release for those involved.

#### E. Religious Symbolism

Man has always drawn inspiration from his ideas about the Cosmos, and religion has sparked the creation of some of the world's greatest works of art. Man's efforts at depicting and recording his conceptions of the Universe and the deities and forces that inhabit it are an interesting dimension in the study of religion.

Religious symbolism manifested in art is not a highly developed aspect of the religion of the Big South Fork. It is ironic because nearly every home contains a religious decoration of some kind; the commercially-produced "Sunday School calendar" likenesses of Jesus and pastoral religious scenes are widespread and are often displayed in prominent places in the living rooms of most households. They also adorn the walls of the region's rural churches and are usually the extent of their decoration. Whether or not these store-bought pictures ever took the place of locally-made artifacts that may have



been in prior use is questionable: in some instances, it is probably so. There seems to be little indigenous religious art being made in the region today. One notable exception was the fugitive Billy Dean Anderson, who was also a gifted artist. Before he was killed by the FBI in the summer of 1979, he painted a good many paintings of religious nature, which now adorn churches and homes in the Fall Mall area.

Symbolism occurs in areas of culture other than the representational. To individuals who are part of the local religious culture, much of their behavior communicates something deeper than that which is evident in its face value. We should not overlook the fascinating intrinsic symbolism of the baptism, where the sins of the person being baptized are symbolically washed away and he or she is simultaneously baptized in the Holy Spirit; in church rituals such as the Fellowship Handshake and the Altar Call, which emphasize the communal aspects of church membership; in the Open Doors of the Church, where the message is imparted that this circle is open to the sincere believer who will accept Jesus and be born again.

#### F. Religious Music

Music is very important in the religious life of the Big South Fork. It is an integral part of local church services and much other religious activity besides. Church meetings, baptisms, revivals, funerals, social church occasions like homecomings, and gospel radio broadcasts would not be complete without some hymn-singing. The region's religious music is as vast a musical reservoir as its secular folk music, and it is not easy to do it proper justice in the few pages that this context permits. Our fieldwork enabled us to identify and define three different religious music traditions in the area, and we were able to document the two of these forms that still exist. They make it possible to trace the development of religious music around the Big South Fork and to see how it attained

its present forms.

### Old Baptist Church Music

The oldest of these musical traditions is the Old Baptist style of unison congregational singing, which occurs with or without the related custom of a songleader "lining out" the words of the hymn--standing at the front of the congregation and reciting the lines of the hymn in a sing-song sort of chant before the congregation sings them. This music never features instrumental accompaniment. It can be traced back to the 17th Century: Jones (1977b) says that it was initiated by the Westminster Assembly in England in 1644. The "lining out" practice has always been beneficial to non-readers but the increased literacy of the 20th Century has brought it into decline. This congregational singing style still survives in many of the more conservative rural Baptist churches of the Big South Fork, although ~~the~~ "lining out" appears to have died out. The music has changed slightly and now incorporates harmony, probably from the influence of the 19th Century singing schools. A closely related form of unaccompanied solo singing is also present, sharing the same repertoire of Old Baptist hymns and other old-time sacred songs.

The Folklife Study was able to document both the Old Baptist solo and congregational singing styles. They can be heard on tapes UKM/D19a and b, recorded during a service November 10, 1979, at the Beech Grove United Baptist Church in McCreary County, Kentucky. One of the songs, "I Would Not Be Denied," (UKM/D19b) is a beautiful example of the congregation harmonizing in open fifths, which has an archaic but pleasant droning sound. Tape UKM/D20 (side one) is a recording of Alvin Perry, a singer of old-time sacred songs who lives at Smithtown in McCreary County. It contains five songs by Perry, recorded in a session at his home December 11, 1979.

Lawrence Phillips, a friend of Perry's who was present, sings two songs.

Two other songs on the tape were copied from a recording of Perry made by Crit King of Whitley City. Another old-time sacred song, "He Who Died On Calvary Mountain," appears on tape <sup>UKM/IGA and</sup> UKM/D4, sung by Joe Hicks.

The music contained on these tapes is both interesting and perplexing, since only part of it can be traced to published sources. The songs on the Beech Grove tape are easily identifiable; they can all be found in the hymnal that the church uses. The material of the Perry tape and Joe Hicks' religious song are more obscure. Only two of Perry's songs (not counting his rendition of Hank Williams' "House of Gold") could be documented: "When Mary She Came," which appears in Billips' (1854) Sweet Songster, and "The Little Preacher Man," a variant of "The Little Shepherd," which can be found in Fuson's (1931) Ballads of the Kentucky Highlands. Perusal of a number of republished 19th Century collections of sacred music-- Walker's (1958, 1966) Christian Harmony and Southern Harmony, White's (1971) Original Sacred Harp, McCurry's (1973) Social Harp, and Swan's (1978) New Harp of Columbia, as well as the anthologies of George Pullen Jackson (1937, 1943, 1944a, 1944b, 1952, 1965), Revitt's (1964) G.P. Jackson index, and others in the private collection of Loyal Jones--shed no light on the origins of the rest of these songs. The informants themselves learned their material orally; Perry and his wife have compiled a notebook of old-time sacred songs that they memorized while growing up. We must conclude that there is a largely undocumented body of Old Baptist religious music still circulating in the Big South Fork region. These hymns can probably be traced to 19th Century published sources but not those of the Sacred Harp or shape-note singing tradition. They have survived through oral transmission even though they no longer appear in the hymnals used in today's local rural churches.

### The Old Harp Tradition

Vestiges of the Old Harp style of shape-note singing linger on in the Big South Fork, even though the tradition itself has almost entirely died out. This type of religious music involved a particular manner of unaccompanied singing, a special form of musical notation, and its own special song repertoire. It originated in New England in the early 1800s, when music educators developed a system of writing music for the musically illiterate, in which the pitch of the notes was indicated by their shapes, independently of the lines and spaces of the staff. Taught by traveling church singing-school masters, it spread from the Northeast to the South, and finally into Appalachia, where it took hold and has survived in some localities up until the present day.

The Old Harp singing style involved singing in four part harmony. It was taught by the itinerant music instructors who went from community to community organizing church singing classes that would meet nightly for a week or so. They taught both components of the tradition: the singing style and the system of notation. They also peddled shape-note hymnals containing music arranged in this style. Since many of these used the word "harp" in their titles (see references cited above: White, 1971; McCurry, 1973; Swan, 1978; also Jackson, 1965, for the history of the tradition), "Old Harp" has become a generic name for both the singing style and its musical repertoire. These books contain several types of compositions (see Horn, 1970)--hymns, fugues, and anthems--which often used folk tunes for melodies. Pentatonic and hexatonic melodies abound in them, and the Ionian, Aeolian, Mixolydian, and Dorian modes are all used.

The shape-note tradition was still alive during the early lifetimes of some of our informants: Aunt Annie Troxell's grandfather Lewis Menifee was a singing-school teacher, and both she and Rebecca Watson learned to

read shape-note music while they were still young. It is probably responsible for the introduction of harmony into the Big South Fork, and it may have thus influenced the Old Baptist church music. <sup>Old Harp singing</sup> A. may never have penetrated the heart of the region, but it definitely was present around its periphery. Peterson and Phillips' (1978) survey of shape-note singing in East Tennessee today lists only one church in the vicinity of the Big South Fork, Mt. Carmel Presbyterian in Morgan County, where the tradition is still preserved. It is interesting to note that churches like Beech Grove use standard Baptist hymnals arranged in shape notes, indicating a preference for this sort of notation as the proper way to publish church music. There obviously is a sufficient enough demand to keep shape-note editions in print.

#### Gospel Music

The recent popularity of gospel music has eclipsed older sacred music traditions like those of the Old Baptists and the Old Harp singers. Gospel is contemporary religious music, played on guitars, pianos, and other instruments used in today's popular music. As Horsley (1979) noted, gospel is the popular music of American Christianity, and it enjoys wide acceptance throughout the Big South Fork.

Gospel has its roots in the revivals and camp meetings, and in the shape-note singing schools of the 19th Century. As Malone (1979) explains, it drew much of its dynamism and drive from the Holiness-Pentecostal movement during the latter half of the 1800s and the early years of this century. Gospel became obvious in its own right after about 1920. It was popularized by singing quartets representing major music publishing houses like the Vaughan Publishing Company of Lawrenceburg, Tennessee, and Stamps-Baxter. Church gospel sings descended from the nightly shape-note singing schools

and were sponsored by these publishers to promote their printed music and hymnals designed for church conventions and other religious gatherings. From these beginnings, gospel has grown to become a major commercial facet of the country's entertainment industry.

Gospel music can be heard in a wide range of places and settings throughout the Big South Fork area: on the radio, in church services, at church-sponsored gospel sings, and at special gatherings like county fairs, Fentress County's Chicken Festival, and Pickett State Park's annual old-time music festival. A number of the Folklife Study's music tapes are devoted partly or entirely to gospel music: UKM/I1, recorded at the 1979 Chicken Festival; UKM/I3, recorded at the Fentress County Fair in August, 1979; UKM/I5 and I6a-d, recorded Labor Day Weekend, 1979, at Pickett Park; UKM/D8, a documentary recording of Leland Sexton, a gospel singer from Huntsville, Tennessee; UKM/D9-D17, all radio broadcasts taped during September-November, 1979; and UKM/D21a-b, recorded at a service at the Mt. Pleasant Baptist Church in Robbins, Tennessee. These tapes feature performances by a number of local gospel singing groups, and a few from outside the area.

Horsley (1979) attempted to define gospel music in four characteristics: he said that gospel was (1) an entertaining music and a mixture of musical styles using (2) four-part harmony (This is true of its classic form only: solo and congregational styles also exist.) and (3) texts derived directly, symbolically, or interpretively from the Bible to convey (4) an evangelical message.

Gospel is not folk music, although it has folk influences, and it is a Southern music form but not an Appalachian music form. In the Big South Fork, its relationship to the region's religious music is exactly the same as the relationship of current popular music to regional folk music: gospel

has largely replaced an older body of sacred songs in the same manner that rock'n'roll and country music have supplanted much of the native folk songs. Gospel has always drawn on popular forms of white secular music (see Malone, 1979): in its early decades, it borrowed the style of the barbershop quartet and the old-timey string band, just as it now uses the most contemporary pop music elements to get its message across musically. In fact, gospel has always sounded undistinguishably like popular music, except that it has lyrics of a religious nature.

Gospel songs are almost invariably sung in major keys (G is probably the most popular.) and use a repeated verse-chorus pattern. Most are written in  $\frac{4}{4}$  time; they may use either a fast tempo, usually with syncopation, or a slow meter. Gospel is a simple music to learn and to play, and a beginner can perform songs competently using the most rudimentary guitar skills for accompaniment. Thematically, gospel songs tend to fall into one of three basic categories. Vocal proselytizing is evident in all three styles. First, there are the upbeat songs of ecstatic praise, which are usually sung by an ensemble and communicate a message along the lines of "I'm Glad I've Been Saved (You Can Be, Too)." Secondly, there are the slow songs of inspiration and reassurance, those that focus on the trials and victory of faith and the soul over sin, and invite the listener to come forward and be saved. These songs are usually sung as solos and tell the audience that "Your Burdens Will Be Lifted Away" if they believe and accept Jesus. Lyrically and musically, these songs resemble 19th Century sentimental ballads, and seem to be intended to bring forth tears. Finally, there are narrative story-songs, often relating an incident from the Bible or describing a modern-day miracle. These songs help reaffirm the listener's faith. They are generally performed as solos and often use a spoken vocal part.

Gospel music is an important part of daily local radio programming and on Sundays, it dominates the airwaves. WBNT-AM/FM (Oneida), WCLC-AM (Jamestown), and WDEB-AM/FM (Jamestown) all feature live gospel programming on Sundays, and during those hours, the stations bustle with activity. The local preachers who "star" in these broadcasts have their demarcated slots of 30, 45, or 60 minutes of radio time, which they purchase with donations raised from their listening audiences. They arrive a short time before they are supposed to go on the air, usually bringing along a gospel-singing group and a retinue who will make up their studio audience. The studio audience is important because it gives the preacher a body of followers to preach to directly. His message is focused on this little group present, even though he may simultaneously be reaching thousands throughout the Big South Fork area. The audience also provides the obligatory interjections, the "Amen"s and "Praise God"s that punctuate the mini-sermon.

Gospel broadcasts are essentially like church services, except on a smaller scale. They commence with a few minutes of song, with the preacher "praying over" his studio audience in the same manner that he would in church. A few more songs will follow, while the preacher makes intermittent comments and dedications. Finally he will begin to preach, and if he curtails his message before the allotted radio time expires, the broadcast will close with a rousing song from the gospel group. However, preachers frequently go overtime, so the broadcast may end abruptly when the studio announcer switches them off the air. Occasionally, if they have "really got going" on a topic, radio preachers have been known to continue preaching in the lobby of the station while the next group proceeds with their broadcast. Sometimes, instead of preaching for so long, the preacher will solicit testimony from members of the studio audience.



As previously indicated, the Folklife Study documented a number of these gospel broadcasts and they can be found on tapes UKM/D9-D17. UKM/D9 is a recording of Billy Mitchell and Lawrence Blevins, two radio evangelists from the Jamestown area. UKM/D10 and D11 each contain a broadcast by Chris Day (Oneida) and the Neal Family Singers (Strunk, Kentucky). UKM/D12 and D13 feature Chuckie Duncan and the Heavenbound Trio, from Robbins. UKM/D14 and D15 are broadcasts by Oneida's Sexton Family Singers. UKM/D16 features the McCreary County Gospel Singers, representing Whitley City, Stearns, and Strunk. UKM/D17 contains two broadcasts by Elsie Marcum, a woman evangelist from Helenwood, Tennessee.

Gospel singing is fascinating to observe in church, in the radio station, or at bigger events like the annual Gospel Sing at the Fentress County Fair (see tape UKM/I3). It has a unique appeal because, around the Big South Fork, it arouses a latent reservoir of repressed emotion. We have already discussed the emotionalism present in local church services, and it should be noted that gospel singing is one of the more emotional religious activities. In the local society, church is one of the few places where emotion is sanctioned and considered socioculturally "safe," and gospel music is the only form of popular music in the area that permits any real degree of emotional involvement on the part of the audience. This contrasts both with indigenous styles of folk music like ballad singing, where there is hardly any audience response at all, and with more popular kinds of folk or contemporary music, like old-timey string band music, country, or rock'n'roll, where the involvement is more physical than emotional. This statement is not intended to underplay the physical element of gospel singing, which is a conspicuous part of it too, as anyone who has witnessed large-scale gospel events like the one at the Fentress County Fair will emphatically agree.

### G. Religious Practitioners

The preacher, the local religious specialist, is the central figure in communal religious activities around the Big South Fork. Because of his special relationship with God, he functions as the religious authoritarian, the messenger of divine word and the executor of divine will. Although most local communities have at least one and many have several, preachers remain exceptional individuals. They are often undistinguishable from other members of their neighborhoods, except for the special talent that they share, the ability to preach.

The egalitarianism, informality, and disdain for church bureaucracy that characterize the local religious system in general are as evident in this respect as they are otherwise. The Big South Fork has no analogue to a priesthood, and it should be specified that preacher and pastor are not necessarily the same here. The religious practitioner/participant line is not clearly drawn: lay preachers are still commonplace, and even those who hold a pastorate are not always full-time specialists. Their behavior when not preaching is varied and they represent many local walks of life, but two similarities are shared by virtually all of the region's preachers.

Traditionally, preachers have always been men and still are predominantly, although this matter has become slightly more liberalized in recent years and there is now at least one female preacher in the Big South Fork area. This ban on women preaching is Biblically sanctioned and is based on the Apostle Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, 14:34-35: "Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak . . . and if they will learn anything, let them ask their husbands at home: for it is a shame for women to speak in the church."

At one time, this passage was cited as an injunction against women speaking or testifying in church at all. It is no longer as strong a pro-

hibition as it once was, and even the idea of women preaching is not entirely alien anymore.

Elsie Marcum, of Helenwood, Tennessee, is the region's most vocal, if not the region's only, woman preacher. She had been doing Sunday broadcasts over the WBNT radio station in Oneida for about a year when this writer contacted her in the fall of 1979. (Two of her broadcasts appear on tape UKM/D17; what she actually does is technically not even preaching, but testimony.) Mrs. Marcum's religious affiliation is with the Church of God, a Holiness denomination, which makes her unique among the informants who contributed to this study of local religion. Her own church turned her out after she was called to preach, but not because she was a woman; they wanted her to attend a seminary first and she refused. Since then, she has been conducting meetings at her home on Friday nights. Her radio activity has caused a great amount of controversy among old-line Baptists throughout the area, including Crit King of Whitley City.

The second characteristic is that all local preachers believe that they have been personally called by God to preach. This is an absolute prerequisite for all religious groups in the Big South Fork, and for most in the Appalachian region besides, even though outsiders like Surface (1971) have taken a condescending view of it. Seminary training for preachers is not mandatory, but some local denominations do consider it desirable. Some of the more conservative Baptist groups solidly do not believe in it at all, insisting that preachers need no preparation other than what God provides and expressing skepticism toward seminary-trained ministers.

The call to preach hypothetically can come at any point in a person's life, and although it sometimes comes during a stressful period, this is not a safe assumption to make in every case. Elsie Marcum is middle-aged and received the call after she had been saved for 34 years. It generally comes

to men anywhere between their mid-twenties and mid-forties, and some of the region's most dynamic preachers are either young, like Chuckie Duncan of Robbins (b. 1953), or Robert King of Coopersville, in Wayne County, Kentucky (b. 1954), or are new to the role of preacher, like Chris Day of Oneida (b. 1933; began preaching at age 43).

The old-time preaching style that is still common in the Big South Fork may someday be a lost art. Fortunately, we were able to document it on several recordings, with examples recorded both from gospel broadcasts and in churches. Preaching transcends the limits of its religious function and among other things, it provides a major source of entertainment for the participants in a religious service. Preachers are conscious of their role as performer, and to observe a good preacher in action is to witness an amazing display of dramatic pyrotechnics.

Preachers never work from notes or a prepared text: preaching has the appearance of being impromptu and unrehearsed. They deliver their messages in a style that consists of vocal cycles that build from a sedate beginning to a thunderous climax. At the onset of each cycle, their elocution starts out slow and calm but steadily grows faster and louder until they assume a sing-song pattern of rhythmic speech that can almost be described in musical terms. It consists of long, spun-out phrases punctuated by gasps at the cadences when the preacher inhales so he can utter the next line of words. Members of the congregation respond to these driving techniques with interjections like "Amen!" or "Praise God!" After each cycle reaches its crescendo and receives its reaction from the congregation, the preacher quiets down and begins another until he is exhausted.

Preachers also rely on physical mannerisms to elicit audience response. When a preacher "really gets going," his pulpit idiosyncracies may include jerks of the body or rocking back and forth, stamping his foot or raising his

fists in the air to emphasize points, or running up and down the aisles or back and forth across the front of the church in bursts of energy.

Informants who preach describe the experience as an ecstatic, almost trance-like state. "It's like nothing else," is the common way that it is explained. Preachers claim to have little or no control over their words or physical behavior while they are on the pulpit; they attribute their messages to God, believing that he is speaking through them. Sermons are actually probably delivered extemporaneously, incorporating ideas that the preacher may have carried to the church or the radio station.

Despite their importance, it is surprising that preachers generally receive little compensation for their services. Joe Hicks, who was a Baptist preacher for some 45 years, has said that he never received a penny for his activity. His statement may be hyperbolic, but it is obvious that his preaching brought him no fortune. As stated before, the Big South Fork's Christians have made necessity a virtue, and its preachers are supposed to lead exemplary lives for everyone else. Most of the area's rural churches are financially unable to provide a pastor's salary, and many times the best a preacher can hope for is a share of the meager collection plate. This forces most of them to rely on farming or outside jobs to make ends meet. Here, accepting God's call is almost tantamount to taking a vow of poverty, but those who answer the call serve with humility and trust that God will furnish them the essential means of survival.

Hearing a number of local preachers between the summer of 1979 and the spring of 1980, one very obvious preoccupation became evident to this observer. Again and again, preachers returned to the same very distressing theme, that we are entering the time of the Last Days, that we are beginning to see the fulfillment of many Biblical prophecies, particularly those

~~contained in the Book of Revelation, which will culminate in the destruction of mankind and the Second Coming of Christ.~~ Today's wars, rumors of wars, and economic difficulties, along with the droughts, famines, and other pestilences are all seen as being part of the consummation of these predictions. The 1980 Kentucky earthquake was interpreted by many as evidence of a prophesy foretelling of "earthquakes occurring in diverse places," and to Joe Hicks, the Mt. St. Helen volcanic eruption was "a warning for America."

Preachers view themselves as making an urgent last plea for those who have not been saved to repent and do so before the coming Armageddon. One might suspect that preachers may have been hammering on this discouraging topic for decades, but this is not true. Joe Hicks, when asked about this, replied, "No, (in the old days) they didn't preach about the Last Days. What they mostly preached about was sin."

Listening to this recurring doomsday theme in sermon after sermon, one cannot help but occasionally wonder: what if they are actually right? It is a depressing thought, even if the focus might be more plausibly explained (or written off, depending on one's point of view) by suggesting that in this gloomy outlook we are seeing only the Big South Fork's manifestation, filtered through the local world view and ideological network, of the pessimism that is so rampant in the country today.

#### H. Conclusion

Wallace (1966: v) began his anthropological study of religion with the sentence "Like most human beings, I was raised in a religious household." In his own writings about religion, another anthropologist, W.Y. Adams (n.d.) has called Wallace's statement misleading, because he felt that it implied something about modern American society that was not entirely accurate.

Adams chose instead to preface his own credo by saying that "like most modern Americans, I did not grow up in a religious household" (p. 2).

Adams' description is perhaps even more true of those who belong to the generation that followed him and Wallace. Many of us today have come from homes where religion was only a superficial concern and church primarily a social activity occupying a few hours of one morning of the week; where religion was perhaps something turned to only in times of crisis, and not providing any real substance to our lives. We have grown up disenchanted with our religious institutions because they no longer seem to fulfill their original purposes, and in our struggle to cope with the growing meaninglessness and rapid change that have come about during our lifetimes, we have turned to a variety of exotic religious, philosophical, and occult persuasions seeking security, purpose, and answers to life's problems and questions.

The Big South Fork's people maintain a religious faith that is not so easily found elsewhere in present-day middle-class America. It is something that, among the faithful, is felt and practiced nearly all of the time, and in concluding this survey of the region's folk religion, I would again like to emphatically stress how much its people in general still seriously believe in and follow their religion. Their support for their churches is far more than a matter of complimentary lip service, nor is church purely a social occasion even though it does serve social functions. The experience of living among and talking with so many people who were so solidly and sincerely religious had an impact on this writer, and it will likely have similar effects on future outsiders who visit the Big South Fork area.

Although we might say that it is tied to a gradually eroding world view and look upon it as traditionalistic or regressive, the Big South

Fork's religious system remains strong and its survival for at least several generations to come seems insured, in spite of the change that the development of the National River and Recreation Area will inevitably bring to the region. As long as it lingers on, it stands as living evidence of how far America has strayed from its religious roots, and serves as an example of how sincerely-held religious beliefs and practices can bring meaning to peoples' lives.



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