

Oral History Ethel Baldwin

Interviewer- Kuanita E. Murphy

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Transcription by Zach Bryan 11/14/2022

Kuanita Murphy: Testing one, two, three, this is Kuanita Murphy. I am on my way to the home of Ms. Ethel Baldwin. Today is Tuesday, April 15th, 2003.

Ethel Baldwin: I was about five years old. My grandpa Simon Harmond lived to be 89 I believe. He or my grandma was 89 the other was 92. One of them died before the other. Grandpa died and he was around 89 years old. I can remember when he died, but what I was trying to say was they used to make chewing tobacco. All of the tobacco like “unintelligible” and they had it in a great old slab. And when they bought that tobacco they had something like a bull and it was made out of a tin stamp. They would stick that stamp in that tobacco that way you would know it was “unintelligible.” Grandpa had opened that plug of tobacco and he had that stamp in his hand and he had the songbook, and he was going to teach me how to sing. I forgot what the song was, but he had the songbook in his hand. He brought me up to him and he took the songbook and showed me how to sing the song that he had in his hand. When he was directing me singing, he had the plug of chewing tobacco. Not the plug, he had the stamp out of the chewing tobacco in his hand. And he had that stamp. It was a little old stamp about that big and it was red. I can remember that. That stamp was red. He was directing me with that stamp in his hand because he was going to cut a piece of that tobacco off the chute. He had that stamp in his hand directing me as we sung, him and me. I had the book. I started the school young, and I could read a little bit then. He was pointing out the words to me in the songbook. Him and me were singing that songbook together, and if you want me to, I'll sing a portion of this one here and let you know what I'm talking about. I'm singing this song now.

KM: And what's the name of the song?

EB: Well, listen, do you want the note part?

KMM Do whichever one.

EB: Sing the notes and then the words?

KM: Whichever one you're comfortable with.

EB: I can sing but see I need basses and tenors, altos, and sopranos for this song. I'm going to just sing the soprano part of the notes. I would have to add the other parts to it to make the song sound like it is supposed to sound. But even if I won't be singing the full part of that the alto, tenor, and bass. I'll sing that and then when I get to one line, I'll sing one standard of the song. The song would be like “Serving my Lord and King.” Okay, it's (begins singing)-

EB: Summary: Sol sa la doh la doh, mi mi mi re mi re (singing continues.) (Spoken) Then the alto would say- Summary: do re mi do re do (singing continues) Then the leader said (singing continues) (spoken) then the other said (singing.) (Spoken)Then we go back and sing the words. It said-

EB: (begins singing "Serving My Lord and King ") I am forever blessed with health and happiness. (Stops singing) See the part I was saying for the note. Like I said. (Begins singing again) Serving my lord and king. (Demonstrates corresponding shape notes periodically after singing lines) (Stops singing) and then it says- (begins singing) Doing a kindly deed, for those I find in need (singing ends). That thing I just said with the notes. (Begins singing again) Serving. (Stops singing) See that what that is. (Singing) My lord and king. My lord and king. (Speaking) Then the leader said- (demonstrates more shape notes) (Speaking) Then the other said "demonstrates more shape notes" (Singing) Helping my fellow man. Doing the best I can. Serving my lord and king, my lord and king. Praising the living Christ. Praising him day and night. Serving my lord and king. My lord and king. (speaking) See now that's what I'm saying. The way my granddaddy, that's the way my granddaddy was showing me the notes, like a certain note. You might could draw the notes. Like whatever note it is. Like this sol Wait a minute. I can't see too good out these glasses I just got them, and I can't see out of them. That's a sol made like that. Can you see that?

KM: Yes ma'am.

EB: Okay that's a sol there. I'm using the top line sol. That's a la. That's a do. That's a la, see that there. That's a do. See that one, this one, and this one. These two are made just alike. Each one of them would mean the same thing. You'd know that. That's a do, and that's a mi. Those two are mi that's a re. That's where a re looks like an "a" cut in two. That's a do. That's a re, and that's a mi. That's a mi. That's a sol. Now with that hole in it you've probably been told that. That hole in the note- see the rest of them are covered in black, that got a hole in it. That mean your hold that like- (singing) serving! (Speaking) That's what that hole means right there, but that hole with a note open and it's up above the rest of them, that means you hold it and kind of go up a little bit with it. I don't know what you've been told. You might have been told the same thing I'm telling you now.

KM: With the songs your knowledge of the notes and so forth, did you ever go some type of singing school or whatever where they taught y'all the notes?

EB: Well what happened was I had two cousins. Cousin "unintelligible" and cousin "unintelligible." Every third Sunday evening we would go from up there. We lived out In "unintelligible" up there where Mar's momma live at. That was where we lived, and you know where Mars lives. We lived in that house. Every third Sunday evening he'd gather up all the children. Around there and we would go down to that church and practice. That's how I learned the notes. I learned the notes on "unintelligible" sparkling song. That's how I learned the notes on this song right here. I never will forget this song. I just about sung it so much that I used know them by heart, I sung it so much. He said (begins singing) mi so so la mi, mi re do do re do. (Continues shape not singing.) (Begins singing lyrics) When I was lost in sin my savior took me in. He washed away my sin on the cross. He spoke a word of peace and gave me sweet release. And cleaned my soul of all hell's "unintelligible." Come join this happy band and start for Canaan Land. And me I'll bless the lord in the sky, up in the sky. We know it won't be long until we join this song of Moses and the lamb on high. (Speaking) Now that's the song that I learned how to sing the notes on in every part of the practice we mostly sang this song. "My Heart is Filled with Song," that's the name of the song. Every time we'd practice, we'd sing the notes on this song because Cousin Bee or Cousin Bunts would have us down there meeting after church if we'd had church that day. Sometimes doing that Sunday evening they would take us down there. That's how I learned how to sing the notes. We used to go to some singing conventions. There'd be so many people at that church that the little Baptist church couldn't hold the people, and now you can count the few people that come to it.

KM: How often were the conventions held?

EB: We used to have one in January. That was a quarter, and in April we had a quarter and a semi-annual session. The semi-annual session was of the state in April. In July we had the Benevolent Singing Convention where all of the different churches- When I first knew about it, it started, and it was about eight or ten churches in it then. Then every year it would go from church to church. It would go around. Different churches had to ask for it. I want to take it at my church. We would- let me see. In April we had a quarter and then a semi-annual session in July we had the Benevolent Singing Convention where all the churches come together. All of the same people like choir do the versions. All of them come together. But when we had the quarter, it wasn't all of the different ones together. It was just some of them would come. When we had that July singing it would be so many folks that you couldn't even get in the church. Even at Benevolence as big as our church is. And then October we would have a quarter and the state convention, and churches from all over the state would come in together for the state convention. And then we'd start again in January with the quarter.

KM: With the state convention, was it held at Benevolence?

EB: It had been held at Benevolence. It went from church to church. We had church at like Upper Silas, Lower Silas, St. Mark, Lumpkin, Philadelphia, Benevolence, Hopewill. I forgot where it's going to be at this time. I don't know the name and I can't think of it. There's about eight or ten churches in the list. Some of them it would take about two years to get back to Benevolence I would say, even though we were having these semi-annual sessions and we were having these states. It would take you about that long to get back to us and you know go around from church to church. Like you say, you rotate from church to church. Sometimes if this church doesn't want it, if another church asks for it, it would go to that church. That's the way- If this church couldn't have it at that time another church would say "well we'll take it." That's the way we would do. They had the best time honey. Back then people would be carrying out all these big dinners.

KM: Do you remember what year that was?

EB: When the singing was?

KM: Yeah, do you remember that?

EB: Honey, I told you from five years old on up. Five years old up until now. But now you see we've cut it down. We only have a singing in January, one in July, and the state in October.

KM: What was the change in the number of times y'all had it? Was it lack of participation?

EB: That's the reason we cut it down. We only have Philadelphia, Benevolence, New Salem, and Piney Grove. Now we have combined Hopewill with Benevolence. There used to be a Hopewill singing. There used to be Hopewill singings. One Hopewill down on this end and another Hopewill back up this way. Benevolence singing convention was the people right around here that was in it. I think they was my granddaddy started this. Grandpa Simon started these singing conventions. You know congregating themselves together. And there was one up there recently it had another name I don't know what it was but see we had like in July that made all of them come in together. In October all of them come back together for the state. Whatever part of the singing it was all these different singers like the Hopewill they would all come in and combine themselves together.

KM: Was the order of service they run the same as the fifth Sunday singing?

EB: It's not the fifth Sunday singing it's not any "unintelligible"

KM: With the convention what kind of order of service would it go? You had devotion?

EB: Yeah, we had devotion.

KM: Would there be a sermon given or-

EB: No. We just sang. We'd open it up with devotion and what then would happen is "unintelligible" Well sometimes they would meet on a Friday. You could start on a Friday and go Friday, Friday night Saturday, Saturday night, and Sunday. Usually, on a Saturday you would have two sessions. They mostly took care of the business on a Friday. Then they'd start singing that Friday night, and then that Saturday we'd have two sessions like one in the morning. Then they'd turn out for dinner come back in and have another session. Sunday was the same way. We'd have one that morning then come back in and have another one after dinner. That's Sunday. Sometimes it would be night before the people would be through singing. It would be so many people who would sing then. They just sung sung sung. I mean they just sung. They had a list they would call the name out, name by name. Everybody sang. They would write the name down, and they would call the person from the chair. It wasn't like the whole choir sang together. You would stand up in the floor. You've been to one of these?

KM: Not the convention.

EB: Okay. Well we'd stand up in the- they'd call your name. You'd stand up and somebody would give us a piece to the song that we're going to sing. Like he was saying a while ago do re mi fa, stuff like that. They'd give us a pitch to that song, and when we would get the pitch, we would start off on it. Most everybody who got up in that floor would sing the notes before they sung the words. We would meet every now and then to practice, but we don't hardly meet to practice now. We would meet to practice them songs and practice the notes. Like the cousin Bee was practicing us children. That would be us, adult time to meet like every third Sunday evening. All of the adults would come together with the children to practice, and all of us practiced. When they call your name, you get up in the floor, stand up there with your book, tell what number or page you're one, and time your song. If you tell your page you'll know what the time is. Then when you tell your page everybody would—we had alto, soprano, tenor, bass. Bass would sit on this side. Soprano sit right here. We've got four sides of benches in the church. The alto would sit on this side and the tenor would sit over here. And everybody would get their books out, and look on that number that you said, and find that song. Then when everybody was ready the director would give you pitch to your song while you're standing up there by the director. You stood up by yourself, and they would give you a pitch to that song. Then you'd take off on the notes or the words if that is the way you wanted to sing it. Then after you were finished with the notes you would sing the words. After they would give you a piece they would go back and sit down. The director always was a man. Robert Lee used to be our director. Mr. Clandwell used to be the director. A man is one now. Who else used to be a director? I remember Mr. Cland—well "unintelligible" used to be one but they were sold old until they couldn't stand up there, but they could pitch your song for you sitting in that chair. You would get back there close to them, and they would pitch your song for you, and then you'd start off on your song and sing your song.

KM: So they—in a sense the community had its own singing teachers or whatever. I just wanted the correct terminology I read or whatever. Who would go around and teach individuals—

EB: No, we all met at the church.

KM: Yeah, but I'm—

EB: Like we had an instructor like Cousin Bee Cousin Buntz and them.

KM: Yeah, somebody in your family knew it right?

EB: Not really, but he wasn't just instructing us he was instructing everybody. He usually just got children together like I said he had us come back down to the church. After Sunday school or after church we'd go down to the church. What I'm saying is we all adults, adults, and children, come together he would be our instructor and if you took off on that song wrong, they would stop you. They would be looking at it too. But if you took off on in it wrong, they would knock on that table for you to stop, and you'd stop until you got it right. They would keep stopping you in practice time. They would keep stopping you until you get it right. That's how I learned how to sing. A lot of times I hear songs being sung I know they are not sung right, but there's nothing I can do about it. A lot of people pick up songs from people and sing them and they add or they take from, but when they do that I know when they are not singing it right. I can't help it because they are going on through it the way they used to sing it because they have not practiced. I'm not practicing now. We should be, but I'm not practicing. We used to practice all the time like a singing convention coming up. Like a singing convention is going to come up in July. We'd start practicing and we would practice and practice and practice up to the time for that singing convention. That was the way we would do it.

KM: Now how many churches would you say are in the convention?

EB: Right now, about four.

KM: And it's just Georgia churches from the southwest part of Georgia

EB: Well, I want to say something, and you think about Georgia and Alabama. They are not involved with this one. Georgia and Alabama singing the fifth Sunday singing is one. The Benevolent Singing Convention is one, but they don't even combine. We might be the same people that's singing, but they don't even combine with us. To join Alabama the fifth Sunday singing they don't even combine with us. Like Philadelphia, they come from up "unintelligible" Benevolence and New Salem are right down there on "unintelligible." New Salem and Piney Grove haven't been in it all the time. Since so many singers got out of it Piney Grove got in it and New Salem got in it. They had more than Philadelphia and Benevolence. That's why we just have four now. They're trying to get other churches to pick it up because like I said it used to be St. Mark "unintelligible" and those are some churches I didn't name. All of those churches were in this same convention, but they just dropped out because they got down to so—what was "unintelligible" name? He was in it. Mr. Jason William got a church back up yonder. He lived in Westin I believe. I think he lived in Westin, but his church was in it. See when it got down to nobody but him, he was the only one trying to carry the singing. So when he died his children just got out. See that's the way people gradually dropped out. "Unintelligible" Viola from New Salem, John Clark, and them might come. When they decided they want to come they might be joining me. "Unintelligible" will come. And at Piney Grove Man mostly follows us everywhere, but when Man is there maybe Paul

and them, they might come. At home, they'll come but see all of these people just—they need all of them to follow everywhere they go, but they don't follow. Just Annie Bee, Rozelle, and me.

"Unintelligible" We used to hold about three benches of sopranos, three benches of altos. There wasn't ever too many tenors. Just John Lawson and John Lawson the only ones that I could remember. But the bass bench it might have been two rows or three rows of basses over there on the basses' side. On the soprano side now all the sopranos can sit on one seat and somebody else can sit there too. The altos are the same way. We just don't really have anybody to sing these notes now.

KM: When did you begin to see a decline in this type of singing.

EB: It's been a while, but I can't tell you what year. It's been a long time. When Miss Thompson stops the one at Philadelphia that will be it. Because the people that will come to Philadelphia, they don't follow Miss Thompson to the other churches. Miss Thompson and her daughter Glory. It's been quite some time, way before my mama passed. It's been quite some time. Really what happened is the people that were singing passed away. The children weren't really interested in that kind of thing. Once they got a piano and they could hear a song on the radio that they could learn they just gradually moved away from this type of singing. But we want to recruit the people back to this but we can't get them to do it because they call it old folks singing.

KM: What do you think needs to happen to get that to change?

EB: Somebody needs to—I wouldn't say me but I could do the best I could. But if we had somebody really that knew the "unintelligible" notes, and everything means in that book. They could start recruiting our children together. They need to start having us meet out here once a month or something and practice these notes. That's how we have to get them back. That's the only way to keep it going. We have to get the younger folks because the older people that would have been singing, they dead. There's nobody that's into this that we can say "y'all come back." They are not here to tell people to come back. Like I said when they got all of those people that were singing in there. When they died, we didn't have anybody to fill in. There were no young folk to come and sing in here. We need to do something, and we were trying to think of something to do. We can't have a child just come up here and pick up a book and go up there and sing. They have to practice these songs. They have to practice. They cannot just sit in the church and hear us sing them and say, "I can sing it." They can't do that. To get it right they need to practice. More than they want to practice like we did when we were going.

KM: What do you think? You mentioned the piano has taken the place of more contemporary gospel and spirituals. It's taken its place. In one interview I did with Mr. Jones he said he thought it was important that the pastor of the church also take an interest in it in order to keep it going. Do you feel the same way?

EB: Well, the pastor could do that, but I believe our pastor—when we sing, the choir when they sing these notes, he liked them. He loves this kind of singing he said he used to sing like that. We ran him off a sheet. And when we sing, he'd pull his sheet out and sit there in the pulpit and help us sing. Because he said he likes it. Now he could be one of the preachers that could encourage the people to come back, and if there was somebody, we could get like Rozziel. Rozziel might know more, and Man. But it would take patience with Man. You've got to understand him. You know, to understand what he's saying and what he's doing to get that going. Like I said I know the notes but there are some things I can't tell you in the book like this means this or this means that. The only thing I know is the shape-note when I see it,

and I know when you raise your voice and when you lower your voice and when you keep it on level. I know that. I know why you have to do that because you have to keep it on that line. You know you keep it level, but when it raises up from that line to another line it makes it go up a little bit. When it drops a little bit below that line that's when you lower your voice. I know that much about it, but there are some things in these songs that I really can't tell you the meaning of. There are some things like a high clip or a low clip or something. Some of these songs don't have the same thing at the beginning. I'm trying to find one so I can show you the difference. See that right there? I can't really tell you what it means. I used to know back when I was in the choir congregation but see that one there is different. Now if I knew what it was, I could tell you, but I forgot. See that looks like a sixty. See this different shape? That right there. It's different from that right there. Don't they look different to you? Okay, you can take the book and look at them.

KM: Okay.

EB: Don't they look different to you?

KM: Yeah. I see it now.

EB: You see what I'm talking about. The first big thing out there on the end. Okay and there's a difference in those songs, in the pitch of those songs. That's how they get the pitch. From looking at this right here and I don't know if this song like—there would be a difference in the shape of these. Like some of them have this little old thing right there. See right there? Some folk can tell you what that means, and that right there. See it's different too, see that what I showed you, that right there. That means something. That right there now if I could get in touch with Viola and Rozzel they probably have a class choir congregation. I tell you who has one but you probably won't be able to see it. I know who has one. That's Mr. John Lawson's daughter Sarah because John had all of that. She got all of his books. She won't sing but she won't let you have his books. If you had that book it would give you all the knowledge that you want. I could've been reading out of that book and given you the straight of everything, but I don't have the class choir congregation. I used to have one because they had a hardback on them. They didn't have a soft back like this. That back was a real hardback and eventually, that back tore off like these can. When it tore off it was just a hardback book. I don't think they make too many hardback books now. Once you can find that book, you'll get all the information you need from that rudiment.

KM: Okay. Okay.

EB: I don't know if I told anything that's going to help you or not.

(Tape Ends)