

Clarke Lee, Interview with Laurie Sommers
June 20, 2005

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Location: Power South, Lawn Equipment, Waycross, GA

2:20 LKS Earliest memory of annual meeting? Anything special? Anything jumps out at you?

CL Not really. Annual mtg. to my, my earliest memories was that was a good time cause everyone came to church from everywhere, and all of us youngens got to play outside a whole lot. That was my earliest memories of annual mtg. really. High Bluff; High Bluff was where my parents were memories of... We always had company. Even on regular mtg. times, but esp. at annual meeting. We would have, goodness ain't no telling, we would have from 10-15 people. They cooked at ate. We played and ate. Most of the time we'd have a sacred harp sing sometime that weekend. Sat. night or Sunday night. That was always a treat. See everybody and sing. House fill up with people. Quite amazing really.

LKS 4:04 as a boy, any role at annual meeting?

CL (laughs) I was just a youngen. Well, we did get to help out with cleaning the week before. We always did spring cleaning the week before, get everything cleaned up, ready for company. Beyond that, I was a youngen, didn't do anything.

LKS You joined the church at

CL 17.

LKS Before that did you go to the service or were you outside?

CL Daddy had a rule. You always had to listen to one preacher. He would let you pick which one after they announced the arrangements for the day. ... You had to listen to one preacher preach, and then we could go out and play. Unless we had been bad, and then he just made us stay in and listen all morning. (laughs)...

LKS 5:22 Tell me about, joined the church at 17, you have been a song leader for much of your church. Is that the term you use in the church. Is that the term you use for the person who pitches—

CL We don't have particularly a designated song leader as you do in most traditional churches today.... When it came to starting songs in the meeting house, we always left that in the hands of the Lord, and whoever felt burdened to start that particular song then they would do that. Although primarily it has usually been a very small group of people that would start songs. When I was a young man and coming along there was Uncle Silas who probably started most of the songs at that time. Uncle Wilson started some songs. Brother Johnny would start songs fairly regularly. Uncle Eddie once in a great while.

Those were the main ones. When I came along and joined the church it just kind of fell my way I reckon.

LKS 7:20 Most of people you mention have been song leaders or singing school teachers in Sacred Harp. {yes, or highly involved} ... What would be criteria, qualities a song leader would have in the meeting house?

CL First, need to be, have the ability to pitch, where you can sing it comfortably. Two, need to have a pretty wide knowledge of tunes, and what particular tunes would sing what tunes, because the Lloyd Hymnbook that we use does not have tunes in it, it's a words only book. But they're all metered... You need to know what tunes will sing what meters of music so you can start a song in a tune it will sing in. And like you say, traditionally most of those who were leaders have been those who were leaders in S/H music. I don't know there is a connection other than the gift to be able to lead in s/h was used right over in church, because most of the tunes that we sing in church come from the s/h books.

LKS 9:34 are there any other sources for the tunes?

CL Other than just the oral tradition, no. There are some tunes that we have sang and still sing occasionally that we don't know where they came from. We have no written record of the tune anywhere. They're just tunes that have been passed down through the generations...there used to be a bunch like that but through the years and with our exposure in later years esp. to many different tune books and a lot of different people we have actually learned where most of our tunes came from and have been able to trace em back to their original shape note tunes, or realize that this particular tune is where it originated from although through the years it has transitions and changed in different places, you can tell that this is where this music originally came from.

LKS 10:50 Differences in Bennettite side with what you grew up with (Crawfordite)?

CL Yes, several differences. #1 was the variety of tunes. When I joined the Mars Hill Church, which is in the Bennett side of the Alabaha Assoc., they sang a lot of tunes that we had never tunes. Sang a lot of tunes that we had sang, or tunes that we had learned and sang in one particular way but they like us through the oral tradition had changed in some places, and we knew that this was a variation of a tune that we had sang previously. Overall, where I am now, we sing faster than we did at High Bluff and that portion of the Assoc. And there were not as many—where we go now there are not as many people that have sang S/H as a tradition. Most of them had not sang S/H in many many years. So they are not practiced in keeping up with tunes, and they were not practiced in singing the different parts of the music. They have one or two people, when I joined, that would sing the bass part, and one or two high tenors, but not very many. Mostly everybody sang the tenor part of the song. And that was a big difference for me because we had always sang the parts in church just as well as we did at the s/h sings. One thing that they do in Bennett side that we didn't do in the Crawford side, in Crawford side, we never sang solo parts. Fuguing tunes, we never used in the meeting

house Although we sang them in the s/h book. On the Bennett side, where I am now, we do sing fuguing tunes sometimes.

LKS 13:59 Something you introduced?

CL No that was already there. They were not—

LKS They didn't sing parts, how would that work?

CL They don't have that many that they sing, but those that they did, might have a bass part in it, and would have someone who knew that bass part....so bass would fill in that particular part. Mostly the high harmony parts everybody would sing. And then the bass would sing their part...

LKS 15:10 Ornamentation, because its faster on the Bennettite side, do you find there is less, difference in amount of added notes to main melody? That was so noticeable in older slow Crawfordite side of sing? Less, different?

CL Less so, simply from perspective of speed in which you sing, if you sing fast can only get so much in that same little space....The singers among the Bennett side do a lot of embellishment, but not as much as would be found in Crawford side because they sing a little faster. And actually, since we have started going there, although we sing faster than we did, I think they sing a little slower than they did when we first started going there. So that's not something that's being lost, anyhow.

LKS 16:47 What would you want people to know about role of singing in meeting house, how it feels, what's important about that? What is its place within your tradition?

CL Well, two things I'd like to elaborate on. One, is in our rules of decorum in our associational rules, one that that says all meetings and services should be begun and ended with divine worship, which is what we call singing. So from that's perspective its what the church agreed on at some point in time that they would always begin and end their services with singing. In Associational services they are required by their own rules to close with a prayer, so they have their last song and then they have a prayer and close. Well, they close with prayer and sing a song and dismiss. But the main thing for me, and esp. in today's world, we live in a world where our minds are so filled with the needs of everyday living and all the other contrivances with that we have come up with to entertain ourselves. And we sing for an hour before we begin our services, and that hour of singing is not only an hour of praise to the Lord but it's an hour of purging my mind of all the worldly cares that we have in this life and preparing you for the preaching service, it's, there's no way to describe in words the feeling that you get inside of you when you sing. It does something to your heart that nothing else does, not even the preaching service will give you that feeling. And when you sing, there's such a sweetness and such a peace that comes inside of you that you just can't, I hunger for that as much as I do for hearing the gospel preached. I have described it as that for me, a lot of times singing, when we were coming up Mama used to give us working medicine to

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purge all the bad stuff out of us when we felt bad and sickly...that's what in effect singing does for me. It purges out all those bad things and lets you fill up with the good things. Things that have real meaning and merit to them.

LKS 20:25 During the service there are certain portions where hymns are lined. Anything special about lining? Why are some lined at certain times and not others? More in past? Special function of lining?

CL Lining in itself...I feel like that was simply a tradition because many years ago people did not have hymnbooks available, many at that time were illiterate and could not read...so tradition of lining a hymn where the minister would read two lines of the hymn and then they would—two or three depending on how the song was versed—when they sang those and then he would line two more lines, and he would line the whole song that way. And they still do that in the Crawfordite side of the Alabama, they still line all of their songs. Among Bennettite we do not line all of our songs. Most of the ministers will line the first two lines of the song. And that does nothing more than give the people a starting point...There is no particular requirement to line a song. Sometimes we do not line. Just depends on how the servant is feeling that is serving at that particular time. Not required by any manner or means. Some of ministers will just say "Sing at will." Mostly it just provides—if you line the first two lines it gives everybody the signal that now is the time to sing, and they're more likely to sing together.

lining

LKS 23:26 Some preachers don't even pitch it, is the tune embedded in there somewhere? How do people know what tune?

CL Lining, just like preaching, and the different gifts and manners of preaching, everybody lines different. Some people just read like they were reading out of a book. Some ministers have a gift of lining...that they can, they line like they preach. They're given a tune, and it's not the particular tune that the song may be sung in, because...most of the time there will be no connection between the manner in which it is lined and the tune it is actually sang in. The lining is a gift that they're given their own particular. Tune and usually you'll find that particular tune that they line in for a common meter tune will always be the same. Or a long meter tune. Because the meters are different it's just like a song, you have to change the tune a little bit. They'll be much similarity between the two, but they'll be a little bit of difference because the meters are different. And it is a tune of itself, or a song of itself, but that particular gift is seen less and less as the years go by.

tunes

LKS 25:51 but you have it. And the tune that you have, and you preach with a tune, don't know if you would use that term, it's a gift, are you aware of the tune? Tolle has spoken of gifted preachers he has known that had a tune...How do you think you came to that?

CL 26:27 Never really considered myself a liner to start with. If there is a tune there, and to be honest I have not lined enough to recognize that there was any tune there, but if there is there is just something that was given to me.

LKS I guess I'm switching to the tune you use when you preach.

CL OK, from the preaching aspect, its just a gift. That's really all I can tell you about it. It comes of its own free will and it leaves of its own free will. And while its there I try to follow what's give to me. When its not I figure its time to hush and sit down (chuckles)

LKS 27:31 I was confusing the two. You were saying there's less people that line hymns. Are there also less that {who line with a tune} or also preach with a tune?

CL Well, not necessarily. Most preachers that I know among our faith, just about all of them have a tune when they're inspired. There are a few that do not, they simply talk to you as a teacher would talk to a student. But those among the PB are more rare than not. Even, I have visited some over the last years, and even among the Progressives, although they might not speak—think of the word—Most of them speak with a different voice than they would if they were just talking to you. Even those that just talk to you, there is usually a change in their voice set somehow—I don't know what causes it or why—from normal speaking to preaching voice. The, what many people say to us about our manner of preaching, they call it singing the service or singing the sermon. I guess it is, but I really can't describe it. I just know that it comes and it goes.

LKS SO you're not conscious—

CL and it don't hear it myself, as strange as that may sound.

LSK 30:51 To me, the prayers, once the person becomes more taken over by the prayer, that also begins to have the pitch. Is that—have you seen any change since you were a boy to now in how things sound and the frequency of the older ways of doing things

CL Only, not really. Even with the changing of where we go to church vs. where we went to church, there's not that much difference in preaching and in praying. Although in prayers, there are more servants that pray in a talking voice rather than a singing voice. But from the preaching side, most everybody has their tune. Not always be the same, it varies too.

LKS 23:42 Never did get to how people know what tune to sing? I know you ask whether people want this tune or that tune for a particular request (in hymn singing)
Person that's leading starts the tune and that's the cue—

CL Mostly. And that's one difference, I guess, between C's and B's, among Crawfordites we had less hymns that we sung to a particular tune than we do among the Bennettites. Most of the tunes that we sing today out of the Lloyd Hymnal among the Bennettites, we have a particular tune or tunes that we sing that particular set of words in. that they have traditionally sang over the years. The Crawfords did that to a certain extent, but we never defined that you sang this particular words to this particular tune. Whereas among the Bennettites we mostly do.

34:00 And esp. if there are many different tunes that we sing that to, cause I've made notes that Elder Johnson requested this hymn, and he likes it in this particular tune, so I start that tune if I start it.... And that's why I ask sometimes. And There are—I don't know how many long meter or common meter tunes or other meters of tunes there might be. There's some hymns that there are only one particular tune that we know that will fit that particular meter of words, so that's the only tune that we sing. But if you got a common meter song like Amazing Grace, we'll there's hundreds of common meter tunes. You can sing the words of Amazing Grace to any of those common meter tunes, or long meter, or whatever the circumstance might be. So if there is no particular tune that we sing a song to and somebody wants to sing it then we just start whatever comes to mind that's in that meter that seems like it might suit the context of the words.

*words
tunes +
meter*

LKS 35:30 Is there ever anything pre-planned about what text is going to be sung at a particular point in the service?

CL Well I can say there's nothing written down, and mostly nothing planned. There's some ministers that every time they get up to give out a song they have particular song that may have just been given to em, or the words may somehow relate to what is on their mind to speak about. And I have had that to happen a few times, but mostly the particular songs don't bother me. Generally I ask if there's anything left on our list that we haven't sung and we'll just sing the next one. There have been a few times when there would be something particular a particular subject on my mind to speak about, that I knew there was a particular song that was in that same venue, so I would offer that song, but there is no given.

LKS 37:00 So for example you look at the Lloyd Hymnal and there's different themes [that's right] like you're going to do footwashing. Is it common to do a song from the footwashing section if you're going to have communion or is that not necessarily the case?

CL Not necessarily the case. Some people I reckon are more attuned to the different sections of the book but most people never realize they're there..... I think about that sometimes, but mostly I think about that is when, I may look in a particular section in communion time more than any other. If we're having an ordination service, the songs would come from the section that's for ordination. If they have a fasting service anywhere, they'll usually use songs from that particular section of the book, but there's no requirement, and really its left up to whoever is serving as to what they'll sing.

LKS 38:17 Anything else I haven't asked you about the sing that you'd like to add?

CL I can't think of nothing right off.

LKS Let me close with, what is special to you, significant, or different about the Big Meeting time as opposed to other times of worship and gathering?

CL Well, in many ways they are much the same from the perspective that when you go to church, you go to church to share your fellowship and love with one another. And to hopefully give praise to God, and to request his blessing in your life and the lives of all others. Bu the annual meeting vs. the regular meeting time, because for one thing its an annual meeting, so its just one time a year. The thing that sets its apart from a regular meeting is the annual meeting time, all of the churches that you are in correspondence with that can be there will come. And you actually receive them into your home, as a part of your home, for that particular meeting. If I go and visit a church on a regular weekend, I am from another church. But at annual meeting time, we are from another church until we come to that time in the annual conference where the churches are actually joined together. Then we become one body at that particular time with no, without recognizing that we are from other churches because we come together as a body. Which, I reckon should be all the time. People don't, when I say as one body, that is from the business perspective, because we're always of one body wherever we go. If on a regular meeting time, we had a business conference, then only membership of that particular church would be involved in the business portion of that meeting. Whereas at annual meeting time all the churches come together and all the membership that's represented there collectively have a part in that business conference. Beyond that there's not a lot of difference.

LKS 41:44 It's bigger.

CL Its bigger because people make a special effort when its annual meeting to come. Its kind of like spring cleaning, I reckon, the whole family gets together to spring clean. It's the same with annual meeting. Everybody Gets together be together and to share the joy of the moment. And it does bring a special feeling with it, I reckon, because, just because of the time it is.

LKS 42:22 One difference between the Bennetite and the Crawfordites, I think I'm right on this, if you have dinner, with the Crawfordites its sort of separate, people around their cars, as opposed to everyone eating together on the Bennett side.... Am I right?

CL That is correct. Among the Crawfordites, and I don't know when this started, because I have been told in times past the churches used to spread their lunches together. But among the Crawfordites it evolved into a tradition that mostly when we went to church, mother prepared whatever we were going to eat as a family, that's what she carried. She always carried a little extra because sometimes you had people show up who didn't realize there was going to have dinner so they would provide, somebody would have extra for those that did not have something to eat. But the only time we had dinner on the Crawford side, was on their communion time or annual meeting time. Among the Crawfords when they have communion service, in the mornings they have their normal morning service, preaching service, and then they have intermission and everybody goes outside and eats. Then they come back inside and they have their communion service. Where I go now among the Bennett side, we don't, one thing is most of our churches have dinner every Sunday. We have a couple of places do not have lunches on Sunday and that's simply because their membership is so elderly they're really not able to prepare

meals of their own,...but most of our churches have lunch every Sunday, after services are complete, even when its communion time. Although we have our same morning service, and then we have our communion service. But we always wait to have lunch after we have finished communion service and dismissed for the day.

...LKS 45:26 The attempt to socialize and courtships, is that something that you think of in the context of meetings?

CL Oh yes, esp. at Big Meetings, because regular meetings you just saw the regular folks, but annual meeting time you had the visitors from far off. That's when you got the so the girls that you didn't normally get to see. There's been a lot of romances and marriages that have evolved from Annual Meetings and sings both over the years.

Courtship

LKS I guess you stuck with the one you had seen close to home.

CL Yes.... I can remember the first time I ever saw Julie, but she was only a child 13 years old...

LKS Was it at a Big Meeting?

CL Actually, no, they came to our home to visit, but somehow she just stuck in my mind ...

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47:10