

# A BRIEF HISTORY: THE REVIVAL OF SHAPE NOTE SINGING IN VERMONT

**A**The post-war revival of shape note singing in Vermont gathered momentum in the late 1960s and early 1970s through the exceptional efforts of several individuals, especially Larry Gordon, a kind of Johnny

Appleseed of community music-making in Vermont. Soon after he moved to Vermont in 1971, he invited local friends for informal sings around the kitchen table at Bread and Puppet Theater, then based in Plainfield. He was so enthusiastic about this traditional style of music that he persuaded Peter Schumann, the then theater-director-in-residence at Goddard College in Plainfield, to include a few shape note tunes in Bread and Puppet's 1972 Easter Week production of "Stations of the Cross." They recruited a few local singers and sang several tunes from "The Sacred Harp" song book. The singings started spreading throughout Vermont as the Bread and Puppet production went on tour.

Gordon formed the Word of Mouth Chorus in 1973 and soon attracted a dedicated band of talented young singers, who quickly became a polished ensemble that performed extensively in churches, community centers and historical societies throughout Northern New England and the American South. Word of Mouth joined Bread and Puppet Theater for two three-month tours. In 1978, the first of these tours covered 10,000 miles throughout the United States. In 1980, the second tour traveled through England, France and Italy, with an Easter show that featured shape note singing. In 1978, Word of Mouth produced a recording of shape note singing for Nonesuch, "Rivers of Delight," which became one of the first widely available recordings of shape note singing and introduced many people to the genre for the first time.



A quilt made in 1874 for sacred harp singers.



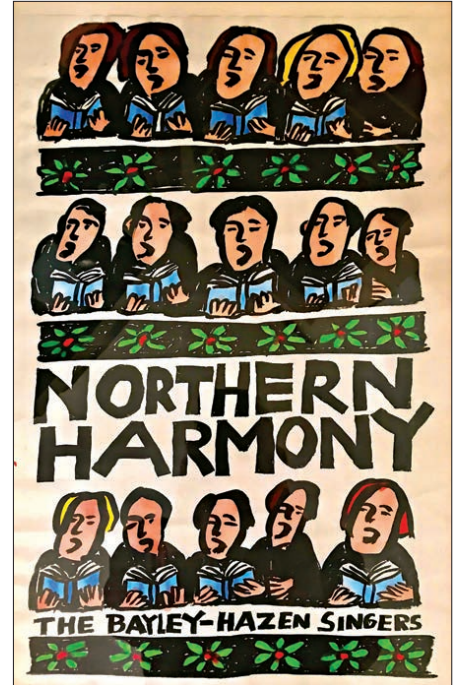
Vermonters Jeremiah Ingalls, left, and Justin Morgan were two of the singers who introduced this shape note style of four-part, a-cappella music back in the 1700s.

With Neely Bruce, Wesleyan music professor, and Steve Marini, founder of Norumbega Harmony in Boston, Gordon and Word of Mouth helped establish the annual New England Sacred Harp Convention in 1976, the first convention of its kind outside of the American South. The first New England Convention to be held in Vermont was in 1977, in the Hay Barn at Goddard College in Plainfield. A busload of Southerners came to participate, including Hugh McGraw, a leading figure in the spread of Sacred Harp singing.

Gordon was also instrumental in organizing the Bayley-Hazen Singers and the Northern Harmony singers whose repertoires included shape note tunes as well as other early American choral music, English "West Gallery" music, South African freedom songs, Balkan village songs, and Appalachian hymns and carols. Tony Barrand and John Roberts of Marlboro College and Brattleboro became another focus radiating shape note music in southeastern Vermont. In the 1980s, Dan Hertzler started shape note singing groups in Norwich and Hanover, N.H.

Eventually, there were enough local singing groups for an All-Day Vermont Singing. Elka Schumann of Bread and Puppet recalls that the first Vermont All-Day Sacred Harp Singing was in 1981 at the Plainfield Town Hall. By tradition, it is held on "the Saturday before the fourth Sunday in March, unless it's Easter, in which case it's a week earlier."

Given the spreading interest, Barrand, Gordon and Carole Moody Crompton published a hardcover, shape note song book, "Northern Harmony: Plain Tunes, Fuging Tunes and Anthems from the New England Singing School Tradition," now in its fourth edition.



A poster for the Bayley-Hazen singers.

Another note-worthy tune book was "The Christian Harmony or Songster's Companion," originally published by Jeremiah Ingalls in 1805 and reset and edited by Thomas B. Malone in 2005 in "The Jeremiah Ingalls Society Bicentennial Edition," 1805-2005. It inspired another all-day annual singing in Vermont. The annual All-Day Jeremiah Ingalls and Sacred Harp Singing "takes place the Saturday before the third Sunday in July."

Currently, Gordon continues his musical missionary endeavors with Village Harmony, an umbrella organization for a diverse range of choral, world music and harmony singing activities.

Sacred Harp singing has had a resurgence locally and internationally. With no auditions and no performances, Sacred Harp singings attract a diverse mix of people who gather to create bold, four-part, a cappella harmonies. Today, there are ten local singings in Vermont or nearby as well as three annual singings.

All shape note singings are free and open to all.