

## **Reflection on the Boom Days of Coal Oral History Project Music of the Upper Kanawha Valley:**

**Catherine Swan**

Shepherd Service-Learning Intern, Cabin Creek Health Center

During my time as a Shepherd Alliance Intern in the summer of 2005, one of my major projects was to continue “The Boom Days of Coal” Oral History Project started by students at Riverside High School in the spring. Throughout my two months in Cabin Creek I conducted ten interviews with thirteen local residents. Through these interviews I gained insight into the musical lives of local residents, as well as information on the musical culture of this area. All of the interviewees were involved with mountain music, such as bluegrass, folk, and country. Several of the interviewees were also involved with gospel music.

As I was contacting residents for interviews, I was always pleasantly surprised at how willing they were to be interviewed. Many invited me to their house on the spot when I approached them about an interview, and all of the interviewees proved to be incredibly welcoming and friendly. I am grateful to all of the musicians who generously gave of their time to share their experiences with me.

The mountain music that is so popular here has been passed down through countless generations, and I believe this lengthy history is part of what makes it so special. Many of the musicians I interviewed commented on what incredible talent exists in this area, talent that would be worthy of a place in Nashville. I also spoke with many people who had once played or socialized with country and bluegrass artists who play in Nashville and are nationally known. The importance of music to this area and the wealth of talent that exists cannot be overemphasized.

Although the majority of my interviewees played in the same genre of music, they were all very diverse in terms of their background and interests. My interviewees ranged from an insurance salesman who is the proprietor of the Kanawha Valley Jamboree and is also in the process of starting a radio show, to men who have just been picking their guitar for fun since they were children. I even interviewed the mayor of Marmet, who has been involved with gospel quartet singing for over fifty years.

As a music major who is entering the field of choral music education, it is safe to say that the people I interviewed for this project come from a vastly different musical background than I do. Almost none of the residents interviewed could read music; they all played by ear. As someone who has spent over a decade studying, learning, and playing from music on a printed page, it was difficult for me at first to get used to the idea of musicians who had spent a lifetime playing by ear. Several interviewees commented to me that they much preferred that method over those who played by music, because it added more feeling to the performance and gave them greater enjoyment. While I disagree with the absolute validity of their thoughts, I believe they raise a very good point that all musicians can learn from. Black dots and lines on a page do not make music. Human beings with instruments make music. I do believe that those who read music often fall into a trap of never being able to free themselves from the page enough to allow expression to come through. Our challenge as musicians is to use whatever means necessary to make music that is true to the composer's intentions and that speaks to the audience. While our methods of getting there may be different, our goal is to be responsible for the creation of something that is a more powerful means of expression than any other language. I believe all of the musicians I have interviewed have accomplished this in a way that has been meaningful both to themselves and their community.