

In our uplands there are hundreds of hymn-singers who still think a pleasant way to spend a Sunday is to sing all day in a church. When the crops are laid by in August, we like to attend the same sort of all-day singing that our fathers attended.

We still sing from music books printed with shaped notes instead of round notes—with shaped diamonds, circles, squares, and triangles as William Little and William Smith devised them at Philadelphia in 1798. We use the nomenclature of the sol-fa system—the fa, and the sol, and the la. Our singing meetings are organized according to a pattern that our forefathers learned in early politics: each of our townships has a singing convention, and each county has a convention formed of the township conventions, and there is a state convention formed of the county conventions. We have a tremendous local machinery for teaching and disseminating this music; we have singing professors and itinerant singing schools, and we have our own printing presses that turn out thousands of hymnals that even great American libraries have never heard of. We have held singing conventions every August since 1800, and we remember the feud the seven-toners had with the four-toners. The seven-toners favored the modern octave against the ancient four-tone scale. The seven-toners won, but the influence of the four-toners can still be detected in our songs.

Any singer who wants to sing a solo can do so at our singing conventions, and any trio or quartet can have a trial on the platform. All that any singer has to do is to ask the professor who presides if he may sing, and the professor must say yes. The convention is a democratic assembly. As a result, much of the singing is dreadful, but always the audience is patient. And not all of the music is dreadful by any means—the congregational singing is magnificent.

At our state singing convention in the great Textile Hall in Greenville, there sometimes are ten thousand singing delegates. We take fried chicken in boxes, and hard-boiled eggs, and apple pies, and we spend an entire Sunday singing. At one of these state conventions recently I heard Governor Olin Johnston of South Carolina tell the delegates he was born on a cotton farm, the son of a poor tenant farmer, and he knew what singing meant to Carolinians. The Governor then led the ten thousand in the hymn: “When our work here is done and our last crown is won.” Slowly the song moved from note to note, from strain to strain. It swept upward from the heart in a grand triumphant burst of melody. It was superb singing.

—from “Red Hills and Cotton: An Upcountry Memory” by Ben Robertson, published 1942

From Wikipedia:

Benjamin Franklin Robertson Jr. (June 22, 1903 – February 22, 1943) was an American writer, journalist and World War II war correspondent. He is best known for his renowned Southern memoir *Red Hills and Cotton: An Upcountry Memory*, first published in 1942 and still in print. A native of Clemson, South Carolina, a horticulture graduate of Clemson Agricultural College of South Carolina, class of 1923, and writer for *The Tiger*, the college student newspaper. He died in 1943 in a plane crash in Portugal. The SS Ben Robertson, launched in Savannah, Georgia, in 1944, was named for him.

In 1938 pioneering musicologist and folklorist John Lomax visited Ben Robertson in South Carolina and Ben introduced him to the all-day singing festivals of the area which enabled Lomax to preserve the lyrics of many local folksongs.