

The Life and Music of Corky Coker

Corwin "Corky" Coker was a descendant of the pioneer Coker family, that came to DeSoto County soon after the Civil War.

Although he died on April 26, 2005, the memories of his life linger in the hearts of hundreds of DeSoto County residents.

Corky was the song leader at Oak Hill Baptist Church for 55 years. When Oak Hill Baptist Church started in 1882, Corky's great-grandfather, Bryant Coker, was one of its charter members. Corky "inherited" the position of song leader at the church from his grandfather, Sears Coker, when he was only 17 years old. "Singing praises to the Lord" became the church motto during his time there.

Music played a big part in Corky's courting of his future wife, Faye Westberry. Faye and other young people accompanied Corky to revival meetings throughout the area, where he would lead the singing. They were married in 1955.

Over the years, Corky continued to be called upon to lead the music at revivals in Baptist churches throughout DeSoto and surrounding counties. He sang at hundreds of funerals. Corky's own funeral service was the longest on record at Roberts Funeral Home because of all the songs and testimonials that were included in the program. About 400 people signed the remembrance book.

Corky loved to sing, and he had a way of getting people to sing and enjoy it. The type of music Corky led could be described as "old-time hymns" and "old-time Southern gospel". This type of music is quickly disappearing from churches across America in favor of "contemporary Christian music". The old songs, however, have endeared themselves to generations of Christians because they edify and speak to the soul.

While the old hymns are sung throughout the country, old-time Southern gospel music is unique to the South. It emphasizes four-part harmony and lively, joyful melodies.

Some songs reflect strong family values, such as "If I Could Hear my Mother Pray Again". Other songs, such as "Just a Little Talk with Jesus" and "The Royal Telephone" speak of close, personal relationships with God through Christ. A longing for Heaven is expressed in "Heaven Sounds Sweeter all the Time", "This World is not My Home" and "I'll Fly Away".

Southern gospel music crosses denominational and racial lines, and is still sung in a variety of churches in DeSoto county.

For several years, Corky sang in a quartet called the Peace River Valley Quartet. Other quartet members included Jerry Scott, Joe Huffman and Glenn Coker. Tim and Philip Huffman, who were children at the time, accompanied the group with musical instruments, and Margie Huffman played the piano.

As a young boy, Corky was stricken with polio. He was able to walk without a limp through the early part of his adult life, but as he grew older his limp became more noticeable. The old Southern gospel song, "Hallelujah Square", describing how a crippled man threw away his crutches when he got to Heaven, was particularly meaningful to him.

Another song that people loved to hear Corky sing was "The Lighthouse". This song tells about an old lighthouse that many people wanted to tear down, but others who had been saved from death at sea wanted it preserved. The song then made an analogy of the old lighthouse to Jesus Christ and his saving grace.

The words Corky would sing are as follows:

"Jesus is the lighthouse and from the rocks of sin. He has shown His light around me that I might clearly see. If it wasn't for the lighthouse, tell me where would this ship be?"

In Corky's honor, the Corwin B. Coker Music Scholarship Fund was set up at Oak Hill Baptist Church to offer assistance to aspiring church music directors.

*By David Bedell
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