

# Old church comes alive with spirit of music, fellowship

Ed Peaco 11:05 p.m. CDT June 21, 2014



(Photo: Ed Peaco/For the News-Leader)

The music starts again at the Northview Jam. It's an old country tune, 15 or so guitars strumming along with a banjo, a bass, a fiddle and a few other instruments, strumming up a gently energetic hum like a hive of genial bees.

In the kitchen of the old church building, Sandy Fields can hear the music through the open door. She's making coffee and organizing the covered dishes people bring, such as deviled eggs, cornbread, beans, homemade noodles in a thick white sauce, meatloaf, casseroles, a crunchy apple-cinnamon sheet cake and a peach cobbler that already is almost gone.

There is a lot of coffee: It's what the musicians run on.

Fields likes being in the kitchen. She gets to talk to people and make friends. "I enjoy it back here. I look forward to Friday nights," she says.

She wouldn't be keeping order in the kitchen if it weren't for her friend, Beulah Brashears, who served as host of the jam, ran the kitchen and kept everyone connected.

"She would greet you at the door, help people find a place to sit. She took care of everybody," Fields says. "She kind of adopted me as I adopted her. I loved the lady dearly."

Brashears and her husband, Otto Brashears, with their daughter Virginia Baker and her husband, Kieth Baker, were among the founders in 2004 of the jam in Northview, an unincorporated community in Webster County about 20 miles east of Springfield, just off Interstate 44. Virginia Baker had started playing the fiddle a little earlier and Otto Brashears had been playing guitar all his life.

Walter Myers, married to Beulah Brashears' sister, Corine Myers, owns the old church building and made it available for the jam.

Before Beulah died in 2010 at 84, Fields assured her she'd handle the kitchen.

"I promised her that, when she was gone, I would step in," Fields says. "I couldn't take her place, but I could fill the spot. This was her area. So Virginia could continue playing.

The network of music makers and music lovers, getting on in years, projects not only the jam's strength but also its fragility. After Beulah's death, roughly 30 more regulars died in the ensuing year or so. Weekly attendance fell from about 100 to roughly half of that but has since rebounded, Virginia Baker said.

## Call a tune, sing it

On the Friday after Memorial Day, the jammers pack the stage in front of a giant American flag covering much of the wall behind them, and they spill across the front of the room and down a line of chairs on one side wall. Visitors find seats among the folding chairs, old theater seats, couches and comfy chairs.

Similar to many other jams, Northview began by giving each musician the chance to call a tune and sing it, then visitors were welcome to perform.

Official start time is 5 p.m., but people begin trickling in more than an hour earlier. Attendance on this night is 67, including 25 musicians, Virginia Baker says. The number might be low due to a revival at a nearby church.

The musicians take a break to eat around 6:30 p.m., and visitors graze through the evening.

Song selections are split between country ("Who's Gonna Feed Them Hogs," "Folsum Prison Blues," "Company's Comin' ") and gospel ("The Eastern Gate," "This Ole House," "By the Mark"). Kieth Baker helps onstage, moving microphones where needed as different jammers and visitors are featured.

Proximity, affordability and friendship have kept Jim Andrus of Marshfield attending for about four years. "If you go down to Branson, you don't know anybody, and it costs you a fortune. I think it's good that they have these little places," he says, noting that he enjoys music but does not play.

Don Taylor, who has been playing at Northview for seven to eight years, says he enjoys silly songs, such as one called "Trouble," which he found on a

Boxcar Willie album and performed recently. It's an account of a ne'er-do-well who gets into trouble with his banjo, his wife, his girlfriend and the sheriff. "It's a silly song, and I do a lot of them," he says.

Taylor, who lives in rural Dallas County halfway between Charity and Long Lane, goes to a lot of jams in the area, enough to know that it's possible to play every night of the week except Wednesday and Sunday — church nights.

Off the top of his end, he lists: Monday, Strafford, Bruner and Ava; Tuesday, Marshfield; Thursday, Long Lane; Friday, Northview; and Saturday, Phillipsburg.

"The music helps a bunch, but fellowship is a lot of it," he says. "I don't think any of it would work without fellowship."

### **"This is my life"**

Northview Christian Church, organized in 1880, erected the building in 1900 that now is the home of the jam. Over the years, several congregations have used the building as a house of worship.

Walter Myers acquired the building from a Freewill Baptist congregation that was moving. He agreed on the sale by way of a handshake with the church's pastor, the Rev. James Crawford, who is no longer living.

He bought it to gain parking space for his adjacent and nearby properties; for several years, he used the building for storage. When the Elkland jam closed, Myers agreed to start a jam at his building.

Virginia Baker says she didn't expect many people to show up on the first night in 2004, but about 50 did, and the crowds quickly grew.

Walter Myers was surprised by the response. "I didn't realize when we started this that it was really that big a thing," he says.

With the deaths of about 30 regulars in 2011, following the death of Beulah Brashears, some people stayed away from the jam. Some stopped coming because their loved ones had died, others because they felt the loss of Beulah, Virginia Baker says. "Some of them I talked to said it just wasn't the same coming here and her being gone. I guess, after a period of time, a lot of them came back."

Her father, Otto Brashears, at age 96 still attends the jams and played his guitar once this year. "He can still play a little bit. His rhythm isn't quite as good as it used to be," she says.

Randy Claire of Marshfield, who plays upright bass and sings, has noticed a few younger faces and an upswing in the number of musicians over his year and a half at the jam. He takes his mother, who likes to visit, listen and occasionally sing, he says.

The Northview Jam benefits from several revitalizing resources. Every April, the Marshfield Cherry Blossom Festival brings curious musicians and listeners who drop in. Throughout the year, accomplished musicians from Branson and elsewhere drop in. In addition, phenom fiddler Brett Dudenhoeffer from Marshfield frequently attends.

Virginia Baker says she assumed some of her mother's role at the jam, but it was hard at first. She presses on because she recognizes the importance of the jam to those who attend.

"It's the older people. They enjoy it so much," she says. "I don't know how many have said, 'This is my life.' And it's good, clean fun. It makes them happy; it makes me happy."

### **Outlook for traditional music**

Attrition and renewal are key factors in the health of traditional-music gatherings in the Ozarks, said Gordon McCann, who has spent much of his life learning about regional folkways.

"Time is catching up to all of these places. The ones that are pure bluegrass seem to be the ones with more younger people," he said, noting that he knew of many more standout musicians half a century ago than he's aware of now.

McCann said he knows of several accomplished youngsters playing the fiddle, the instrument that is his research focus. He included Brett Dudenhoeffer among them. McCann said he senses that traditional music is gaining popularity through such events as the Ozark Celebration Festival at Missouri State University.

Another factor in the health of a jam is the status of the venue, McCann said, citing his favorite jam at the community of McClurg in northeastern Taney County. The owner of the building that houses that jam wants to sell, McCann said.

His materials are in a wide range of media and date back at least four decades. They are collected at Missouri State University Libraries:

<http://guides.library.missouristate.edu/GordonMcCannCollection>.

MSU Libraries has a Web presentation on jam sessions in the Ozarks:

<http://library.missouristate.edu/projects/jamsessions/index.htm>.

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