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Coleman, Penn played key role in church music, history society told

By Ken Camp

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BELTON-Texas Baptists probably wouldn't be singing the last verse of "Amazing Grace" or singing to the accompaniment of an organ at all if not for Robert H. Coleman and William E. Penn.

The Texas Baptist music pioneers figured prominently in a session on "Frontiers in Baptist Church Music" during the Baptist History & Heritage Society's annual meeting, May 22-24 at the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor.

Tim Studstill, a leader in music and worship for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, surveyed Coleman's influence on Southern Baptist hymn-singing. Mike Linder, choral director at North Central Texas College in Gainesville, explored Penn's contributions.

Terry York, associate professor of Christian ministry and church music at Baylor University and Truett Seminary, also explored Baylor's role on the church music and Christian music "frontier."

Coleman, longtime assistant to George W. Truett at First Baptist Church in Dallas, built what became one of the largest hymn publishing companies in

the United States during the early 1900s.

"His collections were instrumental in bringing hymnic unity and identity to Southern Baptist congregations during the first half of the 20th century," Studstill noted.

Coleman Publishing Company produced 34 hymn collections between 1909 and 1939, and Coleman enlisted famed songwriter B.B. McKinney to serve as his music editor most of that time. Ultimately, the Baptist Sunday School Board bought Coleman Publishing and its copyrights.

"Coleman owned approximately 800 copyrighted songs. Of these, he considered about 200 to be 'choice' copyrights," Studstill noted. They included "He Keeps Me Singing," "Love is the Theme," "Love Lifted Me" and "Have Faith in God."

Coleman also popularized the songs of other publishers, particularly copyrights held by E.O. Excell, an evangelistic singer and hymnal publisher in Chicago. A prime example was Excell's arrangement of "Amazing Grace," including the final anonymous stanza beginning, "When we've been there 10,000 years . . ." It appeared in Coleman's second hymn collection in 1911 and in all of his succeeding collections, except for men's quartet books.

"Coleman is largely responsible for popularizing this particular hymn among Southern Baptists, as well as others, through his songbooks," Studstill said.

Evangelist Penn also left his mark on Baptist church music in the South, particularly in Texas. He considered his "Harvest Bells" collections of hymns in the 1880s and 1890s "the only hymnal of the day that was distinctly Southern Baptist in thought, doctrine and regional appeal," Linder noted.

Another lasting contribution by Penn was the introduction of reed organs

into his evangelistic tent revival meetings.

"Penn used the organ at a time when deep-seated prejudice existed against all forms of instrumental music in the churches," Linder observed.

But the organ music became a novelty and an attraction for Penn's rural audiences at camp meetings, as many listeners heard an organ for the first time.

"Penn's utilization of the organ continued throughout his ministry and is credited for the acceptance and popularization of the instrument in Texas Baptist churches," Linder concluded.

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