Cake in hand, I walked into the opening night potluck of this year’s Youth Traditional Song (YTS) weekend. Although no singing had started yet (as far as I could hear), the dining room of the Prindle Pond Conference Center (Charlton, Massachusetts) hummed with excitement and conviviality. Potlucks can be risky, but if enthusiasm could be measured by food offerings, YTS was already off to a hearty start. The room full of merry voices and warm hugs is bright in my memory, even though it was already dark when I arrived.

Almost before we’d finished licking chocolate ganache from the corners of our mouths, the singing began. Introductions of the enthusiastic organizers and excellent staff were followed by a booming chorus of “Country Life.” Singers of all ages, styles and backgrounds united in jubilant harmony.

Perhaps one of the most delightful parts of a new weekend is figuring out how it will work. With several rooms and halls to choose from, Friday night’s singing was characterized by its spontaneity. I wandered from a dorm room with people perched on bunk beds singing chorus-heavy songs to a bigger circle sing more respectably situated on chairs. Singing sprang up in the middle of a hall as someone thought of a song as she stood up from dinner and all around began joining in. Even the bathroom’s resonance was tested!

All these song clusters made it practically impossible to go to bed. When I finally got up the gumption to leave one, I’d run into another on my way down the stairs that was just starting the loveliest tune! By four in the morning, we’d been singing goodnight songs for at least an hour and had passed around another pitcher more than once. A quiet tune in the chilly night sent these weary stragglers to bed, ready for new harmonies not quite when the sun herself rose, but soon thereafter.

Saturday’s workshops presented nearly as many tempting offerings as the potluck had the night before. From Ken Schatz’s Work Songs to Ian Robb’s discussions of traditional song to Lissa Schneckenburger’s Performance...
Craft, the staff kept our vocal chords vibrating and our thoughts ticking. In addition to the classes offered by the staff, there were a number of fantastic workshops offered by anyone who wanted to lead one, ranging from Shape Note to Basic Conducting to Bawdy Songs. With so many enthusiasts together, song sources became a particularly common discussion topic. The staff members presented an excellent panel describing the stories of a few of their songs and then singing them with hair-raising beauty.

The open-mic on Saturday night proved to be one of the weekend’s highlights. Engaging, varied and consistently superb, the many talents of the participants delighted us all. Having had a full twenty-four hours of resonant bliss at this point, the jury began to come in: the weekend was a brilliant success, and we all nodded as Ian Robb said, “I hope the YTS weekend becomes an annual event and continues forever.”

Luckily, even after the jury’s decision came out, there was plenty of time for revelry. Having belted to the world that Cornish lads are indeed fishermen and miners, I skipped off to the contra dance to twirl down a set and promenade around my singing square. Rosy-cheeked, I returned to the singing hall to find the building’s high-ceilinged foyer filled with melody. After all the location searching of the night before, the acoustic sweet spot had been discovered. The group gradually grew and grew until the room was packed with singers. That night, we learned that Minnesota is south of Manitoba and that Canada is, indeed, really big. In a crowd that large, someone always knew the chorus and everyone else was eager to learn. Choruses buzzed with chords that may or may not have come out quite as intended, but always added warmth and vibrancy to the sound reverberating off every wall.

As night turned to morning and the circle began drawing closer together, the tone modulated from boisterous rabble-rousers about ponies on boats and raising the rafters to softer, lilting melodies. Tears accompanied more than a few songs. All too soon, morning arrived heralded by a gospel chorus. After a few more stimulating workshops, the farewells began as all of us rolled up our sleeping bags and began wending our way homeward. The final singing circle joined hands and closed the weekend with appreciation of each others’ voices and hope for reunion next year.

Ian Robb called YTS “the best weekend of social singing” that he could remember. Elizabeth Null said that YTS was “one of best events” she’s been to due to its “incredible sense of community, great singing and superb organization.” With any luck, they and many more of us will say so again next year. YTS is a weekend with room to grow and with enormous energy to fuel that development. I know I’ll be happy for a reprise!

CDSS was pleased to offer financial support to the YTS; for an additional enthusiastic review, see Natty Smith’s comments at blog.cdss.org/?p=3562. Photo facing page: Anna Nowogrodzki, Ian McGullam, Jean Pauly-Jennings, by Suzanne Mrozak; below: Lissa Schneckenburger, Ken Schatz, Ian Robb, by Natty Smith