

## Autoharp Clearinghouse July 1991 – Andy Boarman

This issue is lovingly and respectfully dedicated in honor of Andrew Forrest Boarman of Hedgesville, West Virginia. With his eightieth birthday approaching in October, Andy easily qualifies as one of the few remaining pioneers of the autoharp. He is also part of a dwindling number of musicians (other than the “schoolroom strummers”) that still play with the instrument lying flat on a table. To carry it a step further, Andy plays **below** the chord bar assembly because he prefers the sound that results from the stronger string tension in that area. When he performed on stage, Andy would rest the autoharp on a barrel (55 gallon metal oil drum, to be exact) perforated with sound holes to further enhance the tone of the instrument.

For every success story there is a beginning, and the saga of Andy Boarman is no exception. He was exposed to music on a regular basis from his birth in 1910 because his mother played five-string banjo, bass, piano and organ. Andy’s brothers, William and Tony, played banjo and guitar respectively. Around age seven or eight, Andy would climb up a ladder and sneak through the window of William’s locked room in order to steal time on his brother’s banjo. He did that for nearly two years before getting caught and William, ten years his senior, warmed Andy’s britches!

When Andy was eleven years old, his mother passed away and he was sent to live with some nearby relatives. A cousin, Charles, had an autoharp and introduced Andy to the instrument. He also picked up a few pointers from Conley Hoover of Falling Waters, West Virginia. However, for the most part, Andy’s style has been self-developed and has remained free from much outside influence.

The banjo was to find its way back into Andy’s life via his Uncle C.C. Stump when he was in his late teens. At his Aunt Minnie Stump’s urging, Andy entered a banjo contest in Blacksburg, Virginia. He won the first prize of three hundred dollars, which was a small fortune at that point in time. (Andy gave the money to his aunt and uncle.) Shortly thereafter, Andy and three of his cousins (sometimes four) formed a band that they called **The All Night Ramblers**. Within this group, Andy played both autoharp and old-time banjo. For a while, they would play for local square dances and barn dances. During this period, their mode of transportation varied between a Model T Ford, a horse and buggy or the “shoe leather express.” Andy remembers walking in snow up to his knees carrying his instruments. After getting a bit of experience under their belts, the group found steady employment for about two years on a dance boat named The White Swan. The 120-foot vessel ran up and down the Potomac River until it met its fate when a 1933 icy flood smashed it to smithereens against Dam #4. Andy recalls that musicians didn’t need a vast repertoire for a gig such as that because, once the boat’s passengers had imbibed a bit, you could start repeating and it would go unnoticed!

Around this same time, Andy married the former Lois Tyson of Sleepy Creek, West Virginia and they began raising a family that was to eventually include five children. For economic reasons, he was forced to put his music “on the back burner” for a number of years and work at construction-related jobs such as carpentry and stonemasonry. It wasn’t until the late 1950s that Andy was free to return to the music he loved. This time around, he widened his horizons to

include instrument building, restoration and repair. Some of the “biggest names” in bluegrass music have come to Andy Boarman over the years to have work done on their instruments (Sonny Osborne, Little Roy Lewis, Jim Steptoe, J.D. Crowe, Darrell Sanders, Blaine Sprouse, Don Reno and Bill Harrell, to name a few). The **Dixie Grand** banjos that he built continue to be held in high esteem. His intricate designs of pearl and abalone inlay are works of art in their own right. Andy has also done a lot of work on fiddles, and played that instrument for a time earlier on in his life.

By far, Andy’s most publicly-played instrument has been the autoharp, and he considers it to be his “main” instrument. (This point may be understandably disputed by the banjo community in which Andy holds a near-guru status!) Over the years, he has played at countless bluegrass and other music festivals, but confesses that he prefers parking lot picking to being center stage. Often, the show’s “headliner” acts, when learning that Andy was on the grounds, would come and get him to play for them on their tour buses. He has also performed at schools over a tri-county of his native state.

Having left home at age seventeen, Andy says that he got most of his education behind a plow. However, he feels that God gifted him with more than enough talent to make up for the lack of a formal education. Andy is blessed with the ability to duplicate on the strings of his instruments any sound that he hears. A modest man, he maintains that his autoharp playing style isn’t all that difficult but rather just different. Anyone who has ever tried to play an autoharp below the chord bars knows that it is **not** easy and that it requires a lot of strength in the picking hand and/or an industrial-strength set of picks. One of the fringe benefits of playing in this manner is that it affords the opportunity for a second person to play above the chord bars on the same instrument. This novel idea opens the door to a nearly limitless array of options including harmony arrangements, picking and hammering or tapping combinations, et cetera.

Andy Boarman deserves to be recognized and cited for remaining true to his roots and for loyally sticking with the autoharp all these years, even when the instrument was treated as a stepchild in some music circles. Haven’t we all felt like The Lone Ranger at times, especially before there was the present-day networking of autoharp publications, gatherings and clubs? Andy says that he got folks to “stand up and take notice” first by playing melody on the instrument, by always having it in tune and by incorporating into his performances types of music not normally associated with the autoharp.

Those people who came to appreciate and enjoy his music urged Andy to record to that it might be preserved for future generations. The result of this endeavor was a 1978 LP album entitled ***Mountain State Music***. Andy played banjo on one side of the record and autoharp on the other. The eight autoharp cuts were: *Medley* . *Smile Awhile* . *Wreck of the Old 97* . *Clinch Mountain Backstep* . *Don’t Let Your Deal Go Down* . *Darlin’ Nellie Gray* . *San Antonio Rose* . *Wildflower of the Mountain*.

A VHS videotape ***Catching Up with Yesterday*** followed the release of the audio recording, bearing the title ***Andrew F. Boarman...Craftsman, Musician, Teacher***. The film, twenty nine minutes in duration and in color, was produced and directed by Stephen Plumlee and Stephen T. Eckerd, with the participation of Dr. William E. Lightfoot of Appalachian State University. The

film explored Andy's life as an active bearer of folk traditions, and featured segments on his unique banjo style, his virtuoso autoharp playing and the construction of his masterfully-crafted **Dixie Grand** banjos.

For further reading, I refer you to Volumes 3 and 5 of *The Care and Feeding of the Autoharp* by Becky Blackley. For those whose interests lean more toward the banjo, cover stories about Andy the musician and Andy the luthier were featured in the April 1984 and October 1987 issues of *Banjo Newsletter*.

September 2007 Update: Andy Boarman passed away in 1999, with his wife Lois having preceded him in death. A Google search on my part resulted in countless references to Andy, his music and his instrument building. Information regarding his recording and video are there as well including audio samples of his musicianship. A photo of Andy playing his autoharp as well as Elizabeth Bukowsky's cover portrait will be posted to the Photos section of the Autoharp Enthusiasts group at Yahoo as soon as my replacement scanner arrives and is set up. I have also ordered the OmniPage software in order that I might present these articles in a more professional format in the future. ER