

Becky and Gordon Blackley – Autoharp Clearinghouse May 1991

This issue of the *Autoharp Clearinghouse* is dedicated in honor of Becky and Gordon Blackley. Ms. Blackley was described in *Frets* magazine as “Being as closely identified with the autoharp as Julia Child is with French cooking.” *Bluegrass Unlimited* stated that “Becky Blackley is one of the major figures behind the relatively new-found respectability of the autoharp.

I would venture to say that most of us probably first became acquainted with Becky through *The Autoharpoholic* magazine, of which she has been the Editor and Publisher since its inception in 1980. Becky also owns i.a.d. Publications, the largest publishers of autoharp books in the world (14 titles). In addition, she wrote *The Autoharp Book*, published in 1983. It represents the definitive history of the chorded zither instrument commonly referred to as autoharp in the United States. The publication received critical acclaim in such noted scholarly publications as *American Music*. In 1985, Ms. Blackley was named to both the International Who’s Who in Music **and** Who’s Who in American Music for her research into the autoharp’s history and for *The Autoharp Book*. She has also written a collection of Christmas songs for the autoharp entitled *Harp! The Herald Angels Sing!*

Her teaching credentials include having given workshops at festivals and other autoharp-inclusive events throughout the country since 1980. She has been an instructor and the Autoharp Staff Coordinator for the Augusta Heritage Arts Workshops at Davis & Elkins College in West Virginia since 1985. On the west coast, Becky has served in a similar capacity since 1983 for the California Traditional Music Society.

Ms. Blackley, in 1981, initiated and co-sponsored with the Oscar Schmidt company the International Autoharp Championship in celebration of the instrument’s 100th birthday. At the same time, she coordinated the Autoharp Activity Center at the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas from 1981 through its final year in 1987. She was also on the staff of the very first weekend exclusively for autoharp at the Ozark Folk Center in Mountain View, Arkansas in 1983 and has been an instructor for that event ever since.

A versatile performer, Becky is especially adept at memorizing and playing intricate arrangements of classical music on the autoharp. Her expertise as a player has been recognized repeatedly as she has been asked to be a judge at the top autoharp competitions nationwide. She will be an evaluator for the exciting new C.F. Zimmermann World Autoharp Championship, which begins this summer (sponsored by the Zimmermann Autoharp Foundation). A further achievement was in being a founding member of the Board of Directors of the newly-formed North American Folk Music and Dance Alliance. She was founding Editor in 1990 of the Folk Alliance Newsletter and continues as Co-Editor of that publication.

Ms. Blackley’s debut recording *Flower of Loudoun County* was released in 1986 with favorable reviews appearing in *Frets*, *Walnut Valley Occasional*, *California Traditional Music Society Journal*, *Bluegrass Unlimited* and other music trade journals. There is an accompanying book for this recording appropriately bearing the title *The Becky Blackley Songbook*.

Gordon Blackley is a certified association executive, now employed as President of the Pacific Coast Gas Association. The PCGA is an educational association for the natural gas industry in the western United States, Canada, Japan and Australia. In the cover sketch (Photos section of Autoharp Enthusiasts group at Yahoo), Gordon is playing a hammered dulcimer made by luthier Denis Murphy. Gordon also plays ukulele, four-string banjo, tenor guitar and anything else with four strings that can be tuned like a ukulele. In addition, he plays glockenspiel and did a stint on harmonica at the Augusta Heritage Arts Workshops under the tutelage of Howard Levy. He is now learning to play the six-string guitar as a rhythm instrument for a string band, and will be part of the Introduction to Group Playing class at Augusta this summer.

Gordon was the sound man for a bluegrass band in which Becky played for several years. When asked by one of the other band members why the autoharp was always the loudest instrument, Gordon replied, "Because the autoharp player is sleeping with the sound man!"

August 2007 Updates:

Becky later recorded a second album, the title of which (*Gathering the Harvest*) was written by New England songwriter, performer, instructor, guitar player and autoharper Harvey Reid. She was the Contemporary Inductee into the Autoharp Hall of Fame in 1996. Ms. Blackley became accomplished on Old Time banjo and fiddle in addition to mastering a number of traditional crafts. The Blackleys moved to a mountain retreat adjoining the Monongahela National Forest in West Virginia some years ago. Until fairly recently, Gordon was employed by the Augusta Heritage Center at Davis & Elkins College. Becky is presently a translator, working from home via her computer.