

Autoharp Clearinghouse February 1994 – Bill Bryant

The *Autoharp Clearinghouse* is indeed honored to dedicate this issue to **Bill Bryant** of Grizzly Flats, California. Having observed the world from the backside of an autoharp for thirty years now, Bill's dedication paid off when he won the 1990 International Autoharp Championship at the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas. In addition to being a first-rate musician, Bill is also a kind and considerate person. I feel privileged to have been able to spend some time with him on several occasions at the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering in Newport, Pennsylvania. The story that follows was compiled from an autobiographical profile submitted by Bill.

Bill Bryant was born in Manhattan, New York three days after Pearl Harbor was bombed. His parents divorced when he was four years old, resulting in Bill and his two brothers being "shuffled around" for eleven years. While attending a boarding school when Bill was nine, he discovered the harmonica, which he learned to play quite capably in a matter of months. This talent secured him a position in the school's western band, and he was a part of that unit for five years. In addition to stage concerts, the ensemble performed on a radio show for the blind and on television. Shortly thereafter, Bill was moved to California, but has continued with his harmonica playing to this day.

Following his schooling, Bill did a stint in the military, being discharged in 1963. He was married by then, and was having difficulty finding a job after his departure from the service. One night, Bill came home to an empty apartment. His wife was gone, as was all of their furniture except for a kitchen table. Even his harmonicas were nowhere to be found.

Overcome by depression, Bill decided to take a long walk to think things over. Along his way, he came upon a music store. Bill went inside to look for a replacement harmonica, thinking that its familiar music might cheer him up a bit. However, something else captured his attention instead. There, on a shelf, was one of the old black Oscar Schmidt A-Model Autoharps. It was used and had a substantial crack in the sound board, but the shop owner assured Bill that it was still in playable condition. He tuned the 'harp, demonstrated the basics to Bill and sold him the instrument for eight dollars.

Bill rushed home with his new-found treasure, sat it on the kitchen table, and was amazed at how it filled that empty apartment with life when he strummed across its strings. Because of his experience as a harmonica player, Bill wanted to be able to draw melodies out of his autoharp. By trial and error, he found the do, re, mi scale and was soon off and running. Although Bill's first attempts as an autoharpist were of the cross handed lap style ilk, he soon switched to the Appalachian position even though he had never seen anyone else do it at that point in time. Bill's reason was because he didn't want to develop the bad habit of looking at this chord bars. Like the harmonica, Bill caught on quickly in respect to playing the autoharp and, within a couple of years, was playing in bars, at folk concerts and even did a television taping in Spokane, Washington.

Bill says that the autoharp has always been an emotional companion for him, and he is certainly not the first person who has related to me the apparent therapeutic benefits of playing the instrument. Bill's day job is that of a designer for a very large corporation, and he says that

many people would “crack” if subjected to the kind of stress under which he has to work. When the going gets tough, the tough get out their autoharps and pick and strum their way back to tranquility. Bill keeps a ’harp at his office and very often spends lunch break lost in his music.

Backing up just a bit, Bill says that he thought he was the “last of a dying breed” as an autoharpist until he saw Bryan Bowers on the ***Real People*** television show. All of his friends seemed to be watching that telecast also (weren’t we all?), and Bill says that his phone nearly rang off of the hook that evening from folks calling to ask if he had seen the program. Some of them even wanted Bill to call ***Real People*** and challenge Bryan to a “Harp Off” of sorts. However, Bill has too much respect for people who are brave enough to try and make a living playing music to have done anything like that. “I’m not that bold” says Bill, “which is why I’ve always held down a nine-to-five job.”

Around 1985, Bill and his present wife, Sharon, moved to Grizzly Flats. It is near Lake Tahoe in the Sierra Mountains. Bill credits Sharon with giving him the nickname Grizzly Flat Harper, and is quick to point out that it is indicative of his hometown and not a description of Bill and his musicianship!

One day, while listening to the radio, Bill heard that the “World’s Greatest Autoharp Player” was to be among the performers at the annual Father’s Day Festival sponsored by the California Bluegrass Association. He didn’t make the connection and realize that it was Bryan Bowers until he and Sharon were seated in the audience and saw Bryan walk onstage. After the set, Bill got to meet him, and credits Bryan with being a major influence on his playing these last seven years.

That same day at the bluegrass festival, Bill and Sharon were heading for their car when they passed a lady holding an autoharp. Bill says that he totally flipped, having encountered his first two living, breathing autoharp players at the same event. The lady’s name was Barbara Larson and, before they parted company several hours later, Bill had picked her brain clean and written down the names and addresses of every autoharp-related resource that she could call to mind.

Since that time, he has traveled to as many festivals as his busy life would allow, including five trips to Winfield before he finally won “the big one” in 1990. Year after year, Bill’s goal had been to go home with a trophy...whether it be for first, second or third place. Now that he has met his challenge, he doesn’t intend to continue competing. Bill’s feeling is that, if the same players keep entering and winning what few contests there are for the autoharp, it may discourage other up-and-coming autoharpers.

Bill plays occasionally with a country band called **Rod Skelton and Friends** and also with a group known as **The Gospel Express**. He is the founder of the Grizzly Flats Autoharp Club, teaches private lessons and also conducts workshops at festivals and other gatherings. Bill performs, as well, at events in his area and plays at churches and other venues when such opportunities arise. To date, he has released two solo recordings, and was also included on Volumes 3 and 4 of Drew Smith’s ***Winfield Winners*** albums. **ER**

October 2007 Update from Bill: “We live in Montana now and I still play autoharp. I’ll be doing a part for the Arizona Autoharp Festival in February of 2008. That is the only festival I have scheduled because it is the only one in years that has invited me to play!

When Homer Welty passed away recently, his family gave me many of his projects. It looks as though I’ll be taking Homer’s place in the autoharp world, but most likely not as dramatic. I am presently working on a 21-chord autoharp kit that will allow a regular autoharp to be played in all keys. It has all the sevenths, minors, minor sevenths and diminished sevenths, but looks and plays as easily as an Oscar Schmidt. The instrument uses only one chord bar at a time and can be played by a beginner. I will be taking a prototype to Arizona with me in February.

I would be very much still active in the autoharp world, but my income has shrunk, and no longer allows me to roam freely across the United States at my will. I have recorded four solo albums to date and am presently working on a country album for 2008 release.” **Bill**

Note: Info regarding the acquisition of Bill’s recordings has been requested, but not received, as of “press time.” If it is forthcoming, I will forward it to both groups. Picture of Bill is in the Photos section of the AE group in the AC album. **ER**