

Autoharp Clearinghouse - April 1994

Cecil White was brought to my attention several years ago by Denton, Texas autoharper Carol Butler. Since my trips to the Dallas/Ft. Worth area seem to be limited to "Redeye" sprints through the airport, I gave Carol the assignment of interviewing Cecil for the Clearinghouse. Unfortunately, health problems prevented her from seeing the project through to completion and, at Cecil's suggestion, Nathan Sarvis stepped in and wrote the feature story that follows. *AC* sends its most-sincere thanks to both Carol and Nathan and, as this publication begins its sixth year, the first issue of this volume is respectfully dedicated to Cecil White. *ER*

CECIL WHITE

"Johnny Appleseed of the Autoharp"

Walk into a meeting of 'Harps Over Texas autoharp club of Denton without an autoharp and, chances are, you'll find one pressed into your hands before you can explain that you "just came to listen." Further protests on your part will result in your being hustled into a back room for a private lesson and, when the evening's over, you'll probably be taking an autoharp home so you can practice up for the next meeting. On the way out, you might be heard to say, "Wait a minute; who's the guy that loaned me his 'harp?" The guy who loaned you his 'harp is Cecil White and, don't worry, because he has plenty of them (twenty-seven at latest count). Not only does he loan 'harps to perfect strangers, he also restrings, refelts, and generally improves the "clunkers" that show up at club functions. When asked what his fee is, Cecil replies, "Just play it and come back next month." How did 'Harps Over Texas acquire such a treasure, and why is he so enthusiastic about 'harping?

Cecil grew up "all over Texas," attending fourteen different schools during the Great Depression. He recalls working on his granddad's truck farm picking tomatoes and cantaloupes. Pickers were paid five cents a basket, and he earned up to two dollars a day (at a time when hourly workers were getting \$1.25 per day). Eventually, he earned enough to buy his first car...a Ford Model T. There were musicians in his family, including an uncle who played guitar. His older brother was given fiddle lessons but, by the time Cecil came along, there wasn't money for his. He got a harmonica instead but, after a short time, Mom banned indoor practice (Mamma Don't 'Low No Harmonica Playin"Round Here), so he appropriated an outdoor practice room--the family privy (recommended for good acoustics!).

Cecil was introduced to the autoharp around 1960 when his daughter got her first job following graduation from college teaching music in small country schools in the Ozark Mountains near Mountain View, Arkansas. Many of the schools had no piano, so she was given a 'harp to use to accompany herself and the children. When she came home for Christmas, Cecil was bitten by the bug and had to have one for himself. He acquired his first autoharp, and played it strictly for his own enjoyment at home for the next thirty years, rarely meeting another 'harper. One notable exception was a workshop with Maybelle Carter in Mountain View. According to Cecil, the "workshop" consisted of Mother Maybelle playing and the awestruck (awestricken?) participants listening--their 'harps safely hidden away in their respective cases.

In 1990 Cecil, who had just retired after thirty-two years as a firefighter, was talked into playing at a talent show at his church. A member of that congregation teaches school with me and, when she mentioned that she knew another autoharp player, I contacted him about joining us at our newly-formed club. He was hesitant at first, but eventually came to a meeting. Like all first-time visitors, he wanted to keep his 'harp in its case until he had "tested the waters" but, once he saw that we were all amateurs, he was persuaded to take out his 'harp and join in.

When asked by one of the members if he played melody style, Cecil replied, "I don't know. I just play." We convinced him to play one for us and it was soon apparent that, not only did he pick melody, he did it very well. Cecil quickly became one of our most enthusiastic club members.

He soon found us a better meeting place, had a club sign made, and began rounding up new recruits. Cecil also started attending other autoharp events, including the Autoharp Jamboree in Mountain View (the first all-autoharp weekend anywhere). When he saw folks there wearing autoharp club tee shirts, he decided that we needed our own and came home and had shirts made with our club logo, which features an autoharp with Texas longhorns attached.

As he played with other 'harpers, he became more confident in his own playing and began to develop a personal and distinctive sound. Cecil plays entirely by ear, preferring fast tunes, but is willing to try and pick whatever anyone suggests. His self-described "get-up-and-get-outta-here" style has a distinct melody line supported by a strong bass and a barrage of filler notes. "I don't think about what I'm playing," he says. "If I stop to think about it, I lose it. For instance, I play 'Wildwood Flower' with a few 'extras.' At one jam, I was asked to kick it off 'straight,' but I couldn't do it. When I tried to think about the tune and leave out the extras, I would get lost and couldn't keep going."

Cecil's innovative style works especially well with bluegrass music, but occasionally raises the eyebrows of the more "refined" autoharpers. One of them gently reprimanded him saying, "Cecil, your filler notes get in the way of your melody." Cecil makes no apology. "That's my interpretation of bluegrass," he explains.

Cecil's interest in bluegrass goes back to the sixties when The Beverly Hillbillies theme ("Ballad Of Jed Clampett") caught his attention. More recently, he was invited to attend a jam session with a guitarist friend "just to listen." This was an "invitation only" session by a group that had been playing together for quite some time. At first, neither Cecil nor the group gave much thought to him joining in the picking. However, while playing at home shortly thereafter, Cecil ran up against a problem while trying to work out "Wabash Cannonball." He got the first part down, but couldn't remember what came next? He called the guitar player and asked him to come by and help him with the rest of the tune. When the fellow arrived, he was so impressed with Cecil's picking that he invited him to bring his 'harp to the next jam. (For the record, he also informed Cecil that "Wabash Cannonball" only has one part. No wonder Cecil couldn't remember the rest of it!)

When Cecil went to the next "invitational" jam, he modestly left his 'harp in his car until the others insisted that he bring it in. He kept in the background, following the other pickers and preferring not to take a "break." It wasn't long before he was being urged to play "Wildwood

Flower." When he responded by telling them, "But I don't play it like y'all do," they assured him that they would follow his lead. Cecil, of course, complied with their demands. (He's modest, but he does love to pick.) They recognized his potential, and soon the group was tutoring him as to their repertoire. His ability developed rapidly as he devoted more and more of his time to playing. Soon, he was a jam session regular and even began performing with them on stage at local shows.

Cecil also began looking for a better autoharp. He put another of his hobbies, motorcycle riding, to good use and scoured every know pawn shop in a three-state area. He brought bargains home from nearly every trip, accumulating close to thirty autoharps. Cecil even found a 'harp in a shop where the owner insisted that he hadn't had any for years. He traded Cecil a mint-condition U.S.A. made Oscar Schmidt 'harp for a pistol. (Now there's an idea--take autoharps to the ghetto and swap them for guns. Someone tell the president!) As Cecil's collection grew, so did his confidence in performing. He started attending every jam session and workshop within driving distance (and some that weren't).

While jamming with other 'harpers in Arkansas, Cecil (always an individualist) decided he needed a more distinctive-looking 'harp. He went home and took a standard 15-bar O.S. out to his workshop and began customizing it. He squared off the corners, added a handmade set of chord bars, and refinished it. Next, just to brag a little about being a Texan and perhaps to rile a few Arkansas pickers (They don't think Texans know anything about mountain music), he cut out a Texas longhorn steer head and added it to his soundboard. His efforts were rewarded the next time he went to the Mountain View Folk Festival. A television crew covering the event zoomed in on him and his original-looking 'harp and featured Cecil on the 10:00 P.M. news. Cecil also chuckles when telling about visiting the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas, where the well-known autoharp builder George Orthey asked him if he had built the 'harp himself? When Cecil confessed that it was actually a modified Schmidt, Dr. Orthey had trouble believing it.

Cecil now had an autoharp that looked the way he wanted it to ("I don't want to look across a jam and see someone playing a 'harp that looks just like mine"). However, he still hadn't found an instrument with exactly the sound he was seeking. He was playing a lot of bluegrass, and wanted a 'harp that he could take to a shade tree jam and be heard by the other pickers. He tried diatonic 'harps, but found that even with a Radio Flyer wagon he customized to carry six, they were too bulky to be practical. Handmade 'harps of other builders had beautiful tones, but he couldn't find one that he thought would best complement his style of playing. He particularly wanted a strong-sounding bass. Finally he decided that, since he couldn't find such a 'harp, he would build it himself.

An accomplished woodworker, Cecil was not at all put off by the thought of building his own 'harp. His previous forays into the world of musical instruments had included the restoration of antique pump organs and player pianos. He hauled his first pump organ back from the Ozarks in the trunk of his '54 Chevy thirty years ago when his daughter wanted one to play. After restoring it, he became much sought-after as a restorer, staying busy for several years. Eventually it got to be work instead of fun so he quit taking organ restoration jobs.

Cecil designed and built his first 'harp mostly of materials he already had lying around. The oak back was from an old piano, the frame was laminated maple, and the top was spruce. Number 1, as he calls it, was 1-1/2 inches thick (compared to the standard 1 inch), and included his trademark, the Texas longhorn. After putting it all together, he was initially disappointed with the sound. It was loud, but somewhat brassy. However, as he continued playing, the sound improved markedly. When he played with other instruments, it sounded even better. Cecil now feels that it takes a while for any autoharp to acquire its true sound. The first sounds out of a newly-built 'harp are never its best.

Cecil had achieved his first goal...an autoharp that met the requirements of a bluegrass jam...a chromatic 'harp that other pickers could hear! In fact, it is so loud that he sometimes has to back off so as not to cover up other instruments. From another room, you would swear that Number 1 was electrified. Cecil feels that, while it's great for jamming, it's still a little brassy for solo playing. Of course, most of Cecil's music these days is jamming, so that is not often a consideration.

As good as Number 1 was, however, Cecil wasn't about to quit building. He quickly started on Number 2, this time experimenting with a top of western cedar that a guitar builder had recommended to him. Until that time, Cecil had primarily associated cedar with roof shingles. Cedar is a very soft wood, but it has a high tensile strength, and Number 2 turned out very nice. It is a beautiful 'harp with a much more mellow tone than Number 1. It is also much quieter.

As Cecil builds, he keeps wondering, "What would happen if...? Harp Number 3 answered the question, "Wouldn't a three-inch-thick 'harp sound even better?" Unfortunately, the answer was an emphatic "No!" The thicker 'harp seemed to accentuate the "rub-a-dub" sound and, of course, it wouldn't fit in a standard case. Cecil was so disappointed with Number 3 that he was going to consign it to the fireplace.

Fortunately, the "What if?" kept him from it, and he decided to experiment further. First he removed the back and planed the thickness back down to 1 ½ inches, reversed the internal bracing, and thinned the top enough to put an arch in it. Again, the results were less than satisfying. The bracing wouldn't hold the thinned top, so he took it apart again, put the standard bracing back in, put it back together, and the 'harp came out sounding almost as good as Number 1.

Cecil loves talking to other builders, and especially enjoyed a recent discussion with Ron Wall. After hearing what Ron was doing with the "floating sound board," he decided to experiment along the same lines with Number 5. He was so excited about the possibility that he started work on Number 5 even before Number 4 was finished.

How many numbers are in the future? No one knows for sure, but Cecil plans to keep at it. He has experimented with different sized sound holes, different thicknesses, various woods, and is now wondering about the number of strings. Wouldn't thirty-eight or forty give you a fuller sound than thirty-six? "Not being satisfied with what you've got is what makes the wheels of progress move," he remarked in an unexpected philosophical moment.

The first thing most 'harpers want to know when they hear one of Cecil's instruments is, "How much does one cost." Cecil quickly replies, "They're not for sale." Remembering the lesson from his pump organ experience of what being too successful means, Cecil simply refuses to build autoharps for sale. He's happy to share what he's learned from building, but he made a promise to himself and to his wife that he wouldn't get involved in a business venture. Probably it is for the best. If Cecil were busy building 'harps for all of the people who wanted one "just like that one," he wouldn't be able to pursue the question that keeps coming to him, "What if I tried this...?"

Although he is adamant about not building autoharps for others, Cecil is very much involved in introducing the autoharp to others. He is constantly bringing the instrument to the attention of those who have never noticed it, or who have written it off as an irrelevant child's toy. At no place is this more evident than at bluegrass festivals. Cecil delights in standing back at a jam and "working the crowd" by circulating with his 'harp, playing note-for-note what the group is doing. He attracts considerable attention from folks who, "Never knew an autoharp could sound like that." Often the jammers will recognize that there's something special going on and invite him up to join the inner circle.

Never pushy with his autoharp, Cecil follows the biblical injunction to sit at the foot of the table until called up to the head. Fortunately, with the volume his current 'harps have, he can be heard at the head while playing at the foot!

Another way Cecil supports and promotes the autoharp is by being supportive of other autoharpists. As mentioned earlier, he attends jam sessions in a three-state area, and helps make the autoharp welcome. At one jam in Arkansas, Cecil found only one other 'harper, a shy, quiet lady who sat back and let the other instruments do everything. Cecil encouraged her to come up closer and play with him, and the other pickers suddenly realized that the autoharp could make a real contribution. When he returned to that locale a few months later, there were five 'harpers jamming, and the formerly shy, quiet lady was up there taking breaks and leading songs with the best of them.

All over this part of the country, people are beginning to get acquainted with the autoharp through the efforts of Cecil White. I often run into people who, when they find out I play autoharp, ask, "Oh, do you know Cecil White?" Yes, I know Cecil. He's the one spreading the word about autoharps. In fact, as you start seeing more and more 'harps showing up at local, regional and national jam sessions, it just could be that you're seeing Cecil, too. If not personally, at least in spirit and in the result of his efforts. Tradition is not static, and Cecil is helping develop today's traditional music by being there and bringing his autoharp along. *NS*

February 2009 Update from Cecil's daughter:

I am Cecil's oldest daughter. He would always introduce me as the "biggest and meanest" and my sister as the "littlest and meanest". Inventing some words there I think. Nathan passed your E-mail on to me. I think your cover stories from *Autoharp Clearinghouse* were all so good. A while back I was sorting through a metal cabinet in Mom and Dad's garage that had some of everything in it. There was a box with copies of AC, as well as *The Autoharpoholic* and *Autoharp Quarterly*. I enjoyed reading through some of the articles. I have since learned quite a

bit from some of the feature articles on autoharp care, diatonic scales, etc. I heard a lot about all this over the years as Dad would talk to me about chords, keys and such. but I did not commit very much of it to memory. Your issue that featured Dad also had a really good likeness of him I think on the cover. That artist was really good. In addition to several copies of that issue, I have the original sketch that you sent to Dad, and intend to frame it to put over my piano or near my reed organ that Dad refurbished for me.

Our Cecil passed away October 25, 2001. It was one day after his 77th birthday and, ironically, he had a stroke while on his way to an autoharp club meeting. It was such a shock to all of his family and friends for sure. Dad was so active and a young 77 it seemed to us. He was having so much fun with his music, jamming with many groups, going to festivals, participating in the 'Harps Across Texas group in Denton. He spent a lot of time introducing visitors to the autoharp and working with new players. Dad loved sharing his enthusiasm and knowledge of the autoharp, and along the way telling them the "do's and don'ts" of playing with a group. He was definitely a goodwill ambassador in promoting the instrument. Building autoharps in his workshop was his passion. He was continually trying new woods, and kept refining his techniques. It is interesting to look at the first 'harp he made and compare it to some of the later ones. There were several out in his shop which for some reason or other didn't turn out like he wanted, so he just stopped working on them, or took them apart. I found some of the patterns the other day that he used when he put his trademark "Longhorn" on the front of each. Another distinguishing characteristic was the Texas dogwood pattern, which DID differ from Dr. Orthey's Daisy sound hole. Dad assured George of that himself, I believe.

My father's shop was a large, built-on-to affair, using whatever materials, doors and windows he happen to have. Over the front door hung a wood sign with carved letters which read: "Cecil's Workshop. Harps R' Us". We got it for him one Christmas. In the front there were also two large, folding doors that he built which when pushed all the way back would open to about a 10 foot opening I think. Most of the time when the weather was good, those doors stayed open. The sounds and smells coming from that shop are still with me. Many afternoons I would come home from school, and before going in to see my Mom and my daughter Megan, I would walk out to the shop and sit on a stool and watch Dad work and we would talk. It is one of those many memories of him that I truly treasure. After he passed away, I kept opening up the shop doors every day for quite some time. It just seemed like the thing to do. I couldn't stand to see the shop all closed up. At Christmas I put lights around his doors.

We still have all of his autoharps. For a long time, I didn't get any out of the cabinet in his music room, which was actually one end of the laundry room. I left them all just like they were. Some he had begun to change strings on. Some were diatonic. I can say that my tuning one of his diatonic scales as if it were a chromatic was a disaster! Since the strings were all marked like a chromatic I didn't know it WAS a diatonic, until I tuned it. Wow! I ended up taking it to Jim Sexton to figure out just what I had. My sister has the first 'harp Dad made. The grandchildren each have one. I have one that I kind of favor and have taken it to Mena, Arkansas to the *Christmas on the Mountain* get-together each year since Dad left us. The others are stored at our house now where the temperature is more controlled than in the empty house next door.

My Mom passed away November 13, 2006 after a second bout with ovarian cancer. She was an exceptional person with a very deep faith in the Lord. It was a wonderful thing to spend time with her doing things around the place, going to church every Sunday, and ultimately being her support as she faced her battle with cancer. After Cecil died, Mom was our rock. She, my daughter Megan and I went to the Autoharp Jamboree in Mt. View the first year after Dad died. Megan and I participated in the classes. We ended up going back to MV the same summer to take Charles Whitmer's beginners class. I learned to play the autoharp when I was a music education major at UNT. As a class assignment we had to tune an autoharp. I brought one home and got Dad to tune it for me as at that time he was refinishing organs and pianos and tuning them. I think that is when this autoharp bug bit him. And, as they say, the rest is history!

We have lived next door to each other for almost 30 years. We have all had a wonderful lifetime of love and living. I am so grateful for this experience. I am so blessed to have had the kind of parents that I did. I have spent the past year and a half sorting through all the things in the house next door. It was hard at first, but was also a healing thing as well. I really miss them. We now have their house up for sale. Another milestone in life.

There are too many of our "Greatest Generation" that are leaving us each day. That generation was and is so remarkable.

I do not practice much on the autoharp, but I have learned to play well enough to accompany myself and even "take a break" every now and then. I do use the autoharp at church some as well as with my students during story time at the Selwyn School in Denton. They are always interested in the 'harp, the longhorn emblem, and the fact that my Dad made it.

Kathy White McIntire