

## **Autoharp Clearinghouse February 1997 – Heidi and John Cerrigione**

If I'm not mistaken, my first introduction to Heidi and John Cerrigione took place at the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering. I recall being extremely impressed, a year later, by their duet performance on the Open Stage at that same event. Since that time, we have been classmates a number of summers at the Augusta Heritage Center, plus the Cerrigiones have been guests at the Capital 'Harpers Autoharp Club's functions, they've attended the Memorial Day and Labor Day weekend get-togethers at Cedarville State Park in Brandywine, Maryland--and they honored me by traveling all the way down from Connecticut to attend the last AC Open House in 1995. Most of all, this wonderful and talented couple has provided invaluable assistance to me by "computerizing" the majority of the song and tune arrangements that have appeared in this publication the last couple of years. There is no way I could ever sufficiently thank them other than to lovingly and gratefully dedicate this issue in their honor. John did such an outstanding job of writing the cover story that I really "got off easy" this month in my role as Editor. ER

Eileen, when you asked if we'd like to be featured in the Autoharp Clearinghouse, Heidi's first reaction was "What would be interesting to read about us?". I felt the same way - but then we began to think about the autoharp community and what we've learned over the last seven years. There are so many talented autoharp players today, many of whom have had an influence on our music as we've traveled to different festivals. We thought this would be a good format in which we might say thanks and extend encouragement to any new players just discovering this very special instrument. Our wish would be for all new players to experience the magic and to learn from the autoharp community just as we have.

Heidi was born into a family of Swiss heritage, the second of six children. She was surrounded by music at a very early age, as the Schneider family was always singing at home. The four-part harmony of the hymns sung at church played an important part in her musical development. At age five, her parents encouraged her to begin accordion lessons. Her Mom would set the timer on the stove when Heidi practiced her week's lesson - practice often interrupted by trips to the kitchen to see "is the half hour up yet?". As much as she didn't like to practice, she sees now that learning music at an early age was important. Her Dad would always request that she play his favorite, the *Tickle Me Polka*. Family gatherings would include Grandpa Gerber on his harmonica, her sister Sandy on the organ, with cousins Jean and Don on the clarinet and saxophone. During high school, Heidi was very active in the school music programs. In her senior year, she was chosen as part of the Greater Hartford Youth Chorale and toured Europe that summer.

I was born into an Italian-American family as the middle child of three. My grandfather Cerrigione passed away when I was two years old, but I've been told he played the banjo and mandolin. My uncles also recall him playing a large hammered dulcimer as they were growing up. I began drum lessons at the age of eight. I can still recall my mother taking me to the instructor's house for the first time and purchasing a practice pad and a pair of drumsticks. Prior to that, I raided the pots and pans out of Mom's cupboards. From the drum pad, I progressed to a trap set consisting of snare, bass and cymbals. At the same time, my brother, Tom, was playing

electric guitar, and our family gatherings were usually highlighted by requests for us to play our ever-popular repertoire of *Louie, Louie* and *Wipe Out*. I marched with a drum and bugle corps throughout junior high school. In high school, I played percussion with the school marching band and an offshoot pep band that played for basketball games. During high school, other interests in printing and photography were developing. While I had considered going on to study percussion in college, acceptance at Rochester Institute of Technology persuaded me to pursue a career in printing. I did, however, continue to play percussion in the college jazz band.

Heidi's first exposure to an autoharp came in the 1970's when her Dad brought home a 15 chord ChromAharp that he bought at one of his truck delivery stops. It looked like an interesting instrument, and he thought that surely one of his daughters would learn to play it. While Heidi and her sisters strummed it occasionally, no one took serious interest in the chorded zither.

Heidi and I met in 1981, and married four years later. My drums had been tucked away in a closet at my parents' house and Heidi's accordion hadn't seen daylight for a number of years. As we moved into a new home, these "miscellaneous belongings" were relegated to the basement. She had never heard me play the drums, nor had I heard her play the accordion. We spent an evening rediscovering some of the old music we had played in the past and, yes, it included *Louie, Louie* and the *Tickle Me Polka*.

In June of 1989, we traveled with Sandy and her husband Joe to visit Werner Wyss in Switzerland. Werner, Heidi's cousin, sings with the Jodlerfruede Stauffenalp, a well known yodel group in Thun, Switzerland. His trips to the U.S. always include visits with the Schneider family. In addition to the guitar, Werner plays the autoharp to accompany the yodels and traditional Swiss melodies that he and the Schneiders love to sing

While visiting Werner in Switzerland, we passed the days hiking and singing in the mountains. Afternoons were spent in quaint family taverns where the meals were accompanied by local musicians playing clarinets, schwyzerorgelis, upright bass and Werner playing the autoharp. He later explained that he wished he had an autoharp that could play in more keys so that he could play **all** the tunes. When we returned home, we discovered that 21 chord autoharps existed, which would give him more choices. We purchased two new 21 chord ChromAharps, sending one to Werner, and keeping the other for Heidi to play. About the same time, I bought a used 6-string guitar and asked Heidi to write down the songs that her family sang together. Our home computer seemed to be the perfect tool for writing out these lyrics and chords.

Also around this time, Sandy purchased a mountain dulcimer and showed us a flyer for a dulcimer and autoharp festival in Binghamton, New York called the Cranberry Dulcimer Gathering. We decided to check it out in the summer of 1991, and Heidi's sister, Mary-Ann, went along with us. We had no idea that this trip was to be the beginning of many wonderful music festivals! The featured autoharp performer that year was Harvey Reid, and it was the first time we had ever seen anyone picking out a melody on the autoharp. We took a melody workshop taught by Drew Smith and learned the basics of melody playing. We smile now, looking back, as the tune he chose to teach was *Simple Gifts*, and everyone seemed to know it except us! We had never heard this tune before (as was the case with most of the music) and we were just like sponges, soaking in all the new tunes. An incredible treat was hearing Marty

Schuman play *Orange Blossom Special* on the autoharp in a mini-performance in the chapel. We had no idea that this simple instrument we owned was capable of such music! This festival was also the first time we had ever seen or heard a hammered dulcimer.

The Ortheys had a booth set up in the vendor area, and we were attracted to the beautiful handmade autoharp displayed there. The kind lady (Mary Lou, herself) told us to pick it up and try it out. At first we were “just looking” but after getting up enough courage, Heidi strummed it a bit. What a dream! We asked if she could recommend any recordings or music books for the autoharp, especially ones of the songs that we had been hearing all weekend. She introduced us to the *Autoharp Quarterly* magazine, which exposed us to a whole new world of autoharp! She suggested several recordings, one of which was the Mill Run Dulcimer Band. We came home all excited about our new discoveries, and immediately sought out other festivals.

In September, we attended the Autumn Hills Dulcimer festival. I was fascinated by the hammered dulcimer and thought I might apply my percussion background to the hammer techniques. We attended a “Discovery Workshop” which resulted in the purchase of a Folkcraft Hammered Dulcimer. Upon returning home, we subscribed to *The Dulcimer Players News* and *The Autoharpoholic*, and ordered several instruction books and recordings from The Marketplace in the *Autoharp Quarterly*. We were bitten by the bug and just couldn’t get enough!

About this same time, we discovered new computer software that allowed us to print out the notation of songs as well as the lyrics and chords. While our family songbook worked fine, we wanted to be able to transpose the chords easily, as well as document the melodies. We tried several shareware programs, but this software, *Finale* by Coda Software, was just what we were looking for. We’ve now used *Finale* for Heidi’s Autoharp classes, workshops, Doofus Music, *Autoharp Clearinghouse*, and even a recent project where Heidi has been involved with adapting melodies for a church hymnal revision.

The following summer, we attended our first Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering. We couldn’t believe there was a whole festival dedicated to the autoharp, and we made many new friends. We were taken in by the sound of the Orthey instruments, and Ivan Stiles demonstrated a diatonic autoharp for us. Wow! We took home an Orthey G-D-A which introduced us to the world of open chording. While it was initially Heidi’s instrument, I would pick it up and play it when she wasn’t home. It wasn’t long before we needed to buy another so that we could play together!

It was at this festival that we met Eileen Roys for the first time. We were excited to hear about another publication devoted to autoharp players. When we realized how much time and effort she was putting in to this magazine, we offered our assistance. We began to help out with the typesetting of the handwritten music that folks would send her, and still help her out today. (Editor’s note: Amen!)

Back in Connecticut, we began attending a monthly gathering of mountain dulcimer players who also welcomed autoharps. D-F#-A Association was being lead by Dallas Cline, and we learned many of the old standard tunes. Through this group, we were introduced to a Sunday night Old-Time/Celtic Jam held at Charlie Gravel’s house in Agawam, MA. This was the beginning of the

group that became known as *Cabin Fever*, a name that Heidi and I still use today for performing in our area, whether it's the two of us or a combination of these folks. The group includes fiddle, mandolin, guitar and mountain dulcimer. The tunes we play draw from many traditional sources. We quickly learned that there were listeners who enjoyed our simple brand of old time acoustic music.

We also began to play with a contra dance band in Granby, CT called *Heart's Ease*, headed by Laura Mazza-Dixon. In this group, which includes flutes, piano, fiddle and hammered dulcimer, we began to learn many English dance tunes. In the beginning, Heidi and I both played autoharp. As time went on, I began to play the acoustic bass and Heidi the hammered dulcimer for dances.

Over the last couple of years, we've been able to attend the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering, the Cranberry Dulcimer Gathering, the Old Songs Festival, the Augusta Heritage Arts Workshops and a few other festivals. In 1993, we heard the Mill Run Dulcimer Band live for the first time at the Old Songs Festival. Later in the summer we met up with Neal Walters at Augusta and played a few tunes together on Halliehurst Porch. But, it wasn't until an Open House at Eileen Roys' home in February of 1995 that we began to form a wonderful musical friendship. I recall Neal teaching us a couple tunes at a Cedarville Campout and making the remark that we should learn those and then he'd teach us some more. Little did he realize that we really would be back for more; little did **we** realize that it was just the tip of the iceberg. We've found a wealth of music in Neal that he's been ever so eager to share. We embarked on a "learn a tune" project where he provided volumes of recordings from his extensive collection, and eventually Neal and Heidi wrote out over 300 songs. From that project, the *30 Old Time Songs & Tunes* book and tape evolved. This mountain dulcimer/autoharp project combined our shared interest in computer notation and old time music; thus Doofus Music became established. The concept of the dulcimer/autoharp books has been well-received. We're currently working on ideas for Volume II. We were honored to join Neal and his wife, Coleen, in his performance as the Featured Autoharpist at Cranberry this past summer.

In addition to all we've learned from Neal, we've been particularly fascinated by several duet combinations: Mike Fenton and Carole Outwater with their diatonic duets; Cathy Barton and Dave Para with their hammered dulcimer and guitar duets, beautiful harmonies and historical perspective; and John and Kathie Hollandsworth with their old time bass and autoharp combination.

Our 'harp collection now includes two Fladmark Autoharps. Our family of instruments just seems to keep growing and, lately, I've been trying my hand at banjo frailing and Heidi's been learning the mountain dulcimer. We host annual spring and fall autoharp gatherings at our home with as many as 15 autoharpers attending. We encourage all levels, and anyone is welcome to come. Cranberry 1997 will bring Heidi back as a workshop leader as we continue to share what we've learned with others.

Heidi and I have been keeping busy playing various functions such as "Friday night at the Library", an afternoon at Border's Books & Music, and background music for intimate Victorian dinners or larger groups such as the Chamber of Commerce or Historical Society. We play a

combination of autoharp duets, autoharp/bass and hammered dulcimer/bass. We enjoy playing together and find that the commitment of a performance helps us to focus on our music.

Thanks again, Eileen, for giving us this opportunity to thank the many folks who have encouraged us. We hope to see you all again this year! **JC**

October 2007 Update from Heidi:

Our music has introduced us to many talented people and taken us to many wonderful places, including California, Texas, Kentucky, Kansas, Arkansas and North Carolina, as well as overseas to England, France & Switzerland. Most of the trips have been as Doofus with Neal & Coleen Walters and we're looking forward to Florida and Oregon as new adventures in 2008.

While we still have our "day" jobs, performing and teaching music lessons fill our weekends and evenings. As a duo, we've released two CDs (Wood Stoves & Bread Loaves in 2003 and Winter's Turning in 2006) and as Doofus, we've recorded four CDs. Just recently we were invited to join our friends Aubrey Atwater & Elwood Donnelly in a gospel band (named Jerimoth Hill). We really enjoy that collaboration and it lures us to Rhode Island a couple times of month.

Our instrument collection continues to grow (our motto is "one more is just enough") with the latest acquisition being an akkordzither from Switzerland. We really enjoy them all and wish there were just a few more hours in the day!

Reference Doofus website: [www.doofusmusic.com](http://www.doofusmusic.com)

Reference John & Heidi's website: <http://doofusmusic.com/JHWEB.html>

Reference Jerimoth Hill's website: <http://www.atwater-donnelly.com/jerimothhill.htm>