

AC Cover Stories April 1998 – Karen & Chuck Daniels

Karen Daniels' name first became known to me though news reports received from the now-defunct **Heartland 'Harpers** club which, until its demise, most often met at the home of its founder, Kathy Wintermeyer, in Grain Valley, Missouri. It occurred to me that, whenever that active organization sponsored a workshop or did a public service performance, Karen was always mentioned as being among the group's movers and shakers. In addition to the regular monthly gatherings, Karen and her husband, **Chuck**, began hosting slow jams at their house in Overland Park, Kansas. When it became apparent that our paths were soon to cross (at the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering a few years back), I was "warned" that, in Karen, I might be meeting my match in terms of enthusiasm for the autoharp! Later that summer, we were fellow students in John Hollandsworth's *Old-Time Autoharp Repertoire* class at Augusta. It was during that week that I became better acquainted with Chuck and observed his expertise in setting up and modifying factory-made 'harpes for greater ease in playing, implementing diatonic conversions, et cetera. During Friday's *Student Showcase*, Karen and Chuck entertained their classmates by playing a couple of duet pieces on **one** autoharp. This was accomplished by Chuck standing behind his lovely wife and reaching around Karen to play harmony to her melody. Needless to say, everyone was appropriately impressed.

In just over six years, Karen has progressed from a perplexed participant in a workshop at the Ozark Folk Center in Mountain View, Arkansas to the *1997 International Autoharp Champion*. I do hope you will enjoy reading her account of that musical journey, as well as some pertinent background information about both herself and Chuck. It is to them that this issue is dedicated.

ER

I grew up in a suburb of Dallas, Texas and, though raised a city girl, enjoyed being a tomboy. In addition to playing sandlot baseball, I joined the neighborhood guys in building go-carts powered by lawn mower engines, and built club houses with my two brothers from scrap lumber that we salvaged at construction sites.

My high school years were somewhat uneventful, but life changed for me while at college--and has never again been the same. It was during that period in time when I met Chuck Daniels and, after dating for some time, we were married. Following his graduation, we lived in Denver for a year before Uncle Sam decided that he needed my husband as part of the organization. Chuck served as an officer in the military for seven years, three of which were spent in Germany. We moved often during those years, as well as increasing our family to include two sons. While in the service, Chuck also spent one year in Korea. He was born in Illinois but, as the son of a career Air Force officer, Chuck grew up on-the-move, including three years in Japan while his dad was stationed there.

After leaving the military, we settled in the Kansas City area, where we have been for the past twenty-five years. Chuck was with Dale Carnegie for several years, and then worked for a year with Positive Thinking Rallies before becoming an independent public speaker traveling to business seminars all over the country.

I was fortunate in that I was able to stay at home and devote myself to being a full-time homemaker and mother to our two boys. They are now grown and married, and Chuck and I became grandparents for the first time in June of 1997. Our new grandson and his parents live on the western slopes of the Colorado Rockies, and our younger son and his wife recently moved in next door to us. We are careful to give them LOTS of breathing room and pretty much let them set the pace for togetherness. Since we travel a good bit, the arrangement seems to be working quite well.

During the period when we were raising our family, I became involved in various projects, hobbies, interests and activities. I was a perennial room mother at the boys' school, den mother for the Cub Scouts and a Youth for Christ sponsor during our sons' high school years. In keeping with my own interests, I became a member of a number of organizations--including the Needlepoint Guild, Embroiderer's Guild and the Quilter's Guild. Either through attending workshops or on my own, I learned sewing, tatting, calligraphy, genealogy, spinning, furniture refinishing and restoration, folk art painting, woodworking, the making of miniatures, various other crafts--and all manner of needlework--eventually designing and graphing my own original designs. I have also taught needlework classes and have done genealogy research for others.

When Chuck wasn't traveling, he enjoyed fixing up houses and tinkering around with cars, and often still has one or more projects underway at any given time. He is capable of doing almost all of the tasks associated with household maintenance including plumbing, electrical work, carpentry and welding, in addition to mechanical work on the family automobiles. Several years ago, Chuck put all of his abilities to the test when he built a cabin from scratch on a piece of property we had purchased in Mountain View, Arkansas. Like me, Chuck enjoys anything that is creative. He retired briefly two years ago, but has gone back to working twelve annual weeks of public speaking seminars in between our many other activities.

Musically speaking, Chuck's background was zilch except for a brief skirmish with the clarinet in the sixth grade. He thoroughly enjoys working on autoharps (more on that later), and one can usually find him doing just that at the various festivals when he's not engaged in attending a workshop. He doesn't read music, but rather plays by ear.

My parents wanted me to become either a music teacher or a concert pianist and, beginning when I was in the third grade, set me on a musical path that continued into my college years. Somehow, I missed out on all I **should** have learned in respect to the application of music theory. Instead, I was taught **very** structured music--learning only to read and memorize. The premise was, "If the composer had wanted it played differently, he/she would have written it accordingly." Hence, I felt stifled, never having been taught or encouraged to transpose, embellish or play by ear. I decided I'd had enough after the second year of college piano, gave up the instrument, and rarely touch it these days.

Some years ago, at Silver Dollar City near Branson, Missouri, I became aware of the mountain dulcimer and fell in love with the instrument. I thought it was just beautiful in its simplicity, and even more fabulous in its freedom. There didn't seem to be any one set way to play it. Deliverance from structure at last! After playing the mountain dulcimer for a while, I discovered the beautiful sound of the hammered dulcimer. These instruments afforded me a musical freedom such as I had never before experienced. I was also beginning to discover other types of music besides classical.

THEN...one day I found an Oscar Schmidt Autoharp at a flea market for twelve dollars. After strumming a few chords on it, I decided the instrument was boring, and under the bed it went. Shortly thereafter, Chuck and I were guests at a friend's cabin in the mountains of Colorado. We happened to see a flyer announcing a benefit performance for the local fire department by some autoharp player. I thought to myself, "Oh, how quaint. We'll come down out of the mountains and hear him play his cute little autoharp." We did, however, attend the concert and suffice it to say that I was amazed at the music that man managed to get out of what I had thought to be a "boring" instrument. As you may have guessed by now, the gentleman was Bryan Bowers and, from that point on, I have never again used the word "cute" when referring to the autoharp.

After hearing Bryan, I became desperate to learn to play the autoharp. A friend, Arlene Holsapple, who knew only the very basics of playing the instrument in the Appalachian (or upright) style was my first teacher. Later, at a dulcimer festival, I took Tom Schroeder's autoharp workshop and eventually enrolled in an eight-week series of classes with Tom offered by the Communiversity program in Kansas City. Those experiences opened up a whole new world to me, and it is safe to say that neither my life nor Chuck's has been the same since.

By that time, I had purchased a new Oscar Schmidt 'harp, and decided to convert the flea market instrument to a diatonic scale. A friend got with Chuck, showed him the basics of autoharp modification--and that was the beginning of his interest in repairing and refurbishing 'harps. About a year later, we were at a festival when Chuck surprised me by borrowing an autoharp and taking a beginning workshop. He went out the next day and bought his own 'harp. Thus, he was hooked--although his primary interest remains in what you might call autoharp mechanics. While blessed with a common interest in this instrument, we each have our own niche.

Together, Chuck and I discovered the various autoharp-inclusive events, beginning with the Autoharp Jamboree at Mountain View, Arkansas and the Walnut Valley Festival in Winfield, Kansas--and later including the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering and the Augusta Heritage Arts Center. The first year I attended the Jamboree was nearly a disaster, and my autoharp career almost ended as quickly as it had begun. Not yet having a good understanding of playing levels, I signed up for a couple of workshops that were **way** over my head. Totally discouraged, I was about ready to pack up and leave when someone mentioned the name Charles Whitmer and said that he was reputed to be an excellent teacher of new players and beginners. Apparently, I wasn't the only one intimidated by some of the other workshops--as Charles had started out the day with fifteen students--and there were thirty two of us crammed into his classroom after the lunch break. Unknowingly, he had rescued me and then kept me from giving up. Since then, I have had the opportunity to take part in numerous wonderful workshops from many knowledgeable instructors.

Among my mentors, I would have to list: Bryan Bowers, for making me aware of what could be done on the autoharp; the aforementioned lady friend who, although her own abilities were limited, knew enough to get me started in the right direction and instill in me an eagerness to learn more; Charles Whitmer, who kept me from calling it quits; Mike Fenton, for special encouragement and Tom Schroeder, who has been my extra-special mentor.

My first autoharp competition was at Avoca, Iowa when I had only been playing the 'harp about a year. At that time, I was too timid to do anything more than play my pieces either with my eyes closed or else staring at the ground. But, I did manage to place fifth in that contest, and the experience whetted my appetite for bigger and better things. More recently, I entered the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Championship in July of 1997. Later that same month, I competed at the SAM FEST (sponsored by the Houston Area Acoustic Music Society)--and became the Texas State Autoharp Champion by winning first place. My prize on that occasion was a beautiful ZephyrHills Autoharp made by Mark Fackeldey.

Several years ago I decided, a week before the competition, to play a couple of pieces in the Walnut Valley Festival's International Autoharp Championship. Although I knew I wasn't a strong contender at that time, I wanted to get the "feel" of the competition. Having tried sky diving (which I loved) and bungee jumping (once was enough) earlier that year, I tended to use those experiences as a point of comparison for all other endeavors. At least my feet were on the ground in the autoharp competition, and it helped me prepare myself mentally for a possible subsequent appearance at that venue.

After attending the 1996 Winfield event as a spectator, I decided that I would compete there the following year. In the process of preparing for that contest, the knowledge and skills I gained were incredible. For me the winning is done at home **before** I ever actually go on stage and compete. My real satisfaction comes from having conquered the techniques, arrangements and other goals that I have set for myself while working on the contest pieces. Should anything come of the competition results, then it's frosting on that particular cake. I don't want to ever become so serious about it that I lose the fun of playing the music. While I was extremely pleased to have become the 1997 International Autoharp Champion, there are many more things I want to accomplish--and I don't ever want to stop learning.

I offer autoharp lessons out of our home contingent upon our travel schedule, and have taught workshops at Esther Kreek's Dulcimer Camp, the SummerFest Dulcimer Festival, the Prairie Dulcimer Festival and the Mountain Laurel Autoharp Gathering. Chuck has led workshops on autoharp maintenance and repairs, with more scheduled for the upcoming season.

Another aspect of music that Chuck and I love has been the wonderful people that we've met, the special friends that we have made, and the sharing that goes on in the music community. The Lord has blessed us richly, and we take pleasure at this time in being in a position to pass on to others some of the knowledge that was first passed to us by our many friends in music.

Knowing that her readers have an inquisitiveness for detail, Eileen requested that I include an "autoharp inventory." At the present time, I am the fortunate owner of five Fladmark 'harps. Three of them are diatonic, in the keys of G-D-A, G-D and F-C. Although the remaining two are 21-chord chromatic instruments, they are not set up in the same manner. In addition, I have an Orthey *Stoneman* model diatonic autoharp in the keys of G-D, and a Fackeldey *ZephyrHill* 'harp that is also a G--D diatonic. I have been fortunate in that I won several of the above autoharps in competitions. When time allows, I plan to modify a couple of the duplicate-key instruments into other configurations. In respect to factory-made instruments, I am in possession of an Oscar Schmidt *Festival* and two OS *Wildwood Flower* 'harps, as well as several standard Schmidt instruments that I use as "loaners" to new students.

And now, a few words from Chuck: "Although I do own and play a Fladmark 4-key autoharp and a *Wildwood Flower* in its original key of D, Karen is the primary player in the family and I am the repair guy. I have lost track of how many 'harps I have worked on for folks in the autoharp community? I stock all available parts for Oscar Schmidt autoharps, do lots of refelting, and am particularly well known for the custom 'soft touch' action work I do. **ALL** OSI 'harps are in need of this attention. I install a set of metal hold-down bars that keep the chord bars very close to the strings. Then, I cut a new pad to install inside the cover of 21-bar 'harps that eliminates all the 'rattle and clack' that is so irritating. New felts usually accompany this operation. While bringing the bars closer to the strings, I also shorten the springs to save on wrist strain. For the curious, I charge \$65 for the action work and \$85 for the felts. It takes a few days to accomplish this service and ship the instrument back to its owner. If you plan to attend any of the autoharp sessions at the Ozark Folk Center this coming season, I'll be there and can offer overnight service at that time. For those who have 12- or 15-bar 'harps, I also do 21-chord conversions.

In addition, I sell the new Korg CA-10 tuner, which is a wonderful unit that has a digital meter as well as the usual lights to tell when a string is sharp or flat. This tuner has the added feature of turning itself off after twenty minutes to save the battery. It sells for \$30. I have been getting great reports from the people who have bought these. In the past, I have always felt a bit guilty selling a 'harp for \$300 or more, and then having to tell the customer that they need a \$90 tuner to go with it. Now I have a less-expensive option. Karen recently added one to her collection of autoharp paraphernalia, and gives it a very high recommendation. She has requested a second one, which I fear could lead to her wanting a tuner in every autoharp case!"

October 2007 Update

In the ten years since this article was written, much has happened in our music world. We have performed and taught at music festivals throughout the country and in England. Chuck continues to do repair and maintenance work on 'harps both at festivals and from our home. For years he claimed to not want to build instruments but that changed at the beginning of 2006, with his first *Arkansas Autoharp*. It has been well received and he continues to make improvements with the latest being a model based on the Oscar Schmidt B Model design. Chuck has also in the past decade become a more decent player. After retiring from the professional speaking field in 1997, he has not truly retired but merely redirected his efforts. Between the eight music events in a typical year, he also has a tree service in Mountain View, Arkansas, and still maintains rental homes in Kansas City.

For eight years, Karen was an autoharp instructor in the Mountain View public schools for the State of Arkansas Music Roots Program (grades 4 –12) and for ten years was an editor for the Pro-Files section of the *Autoharp Quarterly* magazine. Knee problems forced retirement last year and severe cutbacks in schedule this year due to replacements of both knees, the latest being 4 October, which has kept Karen at home while Chuck was able to attend several “new to him” festivals. Karen still teaches. She is now temporarily in a band with her original autoharp instructor, Arlene Holsapple, and the band is set to play several gigs in December. She is presently learning some concertina, having inherited a vintage concertina from a dear friend, and Native American flute at the request of Arlene. She says there's still not enough time to do everything!

The Daniels now have six grandsons (ages two months. to ten years), have been married for forty three years and still always end our sets with our infamous “duet on one 'harp.” This coming year we plan to do some more traveling just to go see and enjoy the U.S.A. **KD & CD**

You may contact Karen and Chuck Daniels via e-mail as follows:

Chuck – autoharpguy@minpin.com

Karen -- autoharpgal@minpin.com

Chuck's website -- www.autoharprx.com

Note: Two pictures plus Elizabeth Bukowsky's AC Cover Sketch of Karen and Chuck may be viewed in the *Autoharp Clearinghouse* album within the Photos section of the Autoharp Enthusiasts group at Yahoo. Anyone not a member of that group who would like to receive them as attachments may direct their requests to esroys@verizon.net

Those who wish to save these articles in their original HTML format should ask me for them as MS Word documents. **ER**