

**Autoharp Clearinghouse -  
December 1999/January 2000 -  
Eileen Roys**

Despite repeated requests over the years to do an autobiographical cover story, until now I have balked at the idea because it has always been my intention to maintain a low profile within these pages. That which follows is probably a lot more than any of you wanted to know about Eileen Roys, but it serves you right for insisting that I do this!

Although I was born in Washington, DC (on 14 May 1940), I have always resided in Maryland. While I wouldn't go so far as to say that I grew up on the "wrong side of the tracks," the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad literally ran within a stone's throw of my childhood home. The trains vibrated our bungalow-type dwelling to the point where knick-knacks would shimmy right off of the shelves if they weren't repositioned on a daily basis. In those pre-diesel days, coal dust from the engines created another routine chore. I still have cinders in my right knee as an everlasting souvenir of a railroad track "tumble."

My father was a career Navy man, having served thirty-eight years between active duty and the Naval Reserves. A Pearl Harbor Survivor, he was a Chief Petty Officer in the Seabees. At that point in time, enlisted men were not granted family housing, so we "stayed put" while he did his tours of duty.

I was the youngest of four children, and the only girl. My brothers, only one of whom is still living, were considerably older than I. You could say that I was a change-of-life baby. During one phase of my childhood, my dad and two of my brothers were all in the service and stationed overseas. In my mind's eye, I can still see my mother sitting at her Secretary desk writing to them every single evening for as long as they were gone. (Update: Brother Don passed away in May of 2007.)

I was truly blessed in that I grew up in close proximity to both sets of grandparents. My mother's folks had an apartment on the second floor of our house, and my paternal grandparents lived within walking distance. My heritage is English and German, with my mother's people having been Bavarian pastry chefs. I'm told that I'm a fair baker myself and, if so, I owe it to my Nana, who had me standing on an orange crate in her kitchen at age four so that I might be tall enough to learn the fine art of cookie baking.

In addition to a house full of brothers, all of my numerous cousins except for one were also boys. My mother was so concerned that I might turn into a tomboy that she went to great lengths to establish, and then continually reinforce, my femininity. I'm fully aware that I have a reputation today as a woman who probably wears a cocktail dress to the laundromat. At the Augusta Heritage Center one year, Mary Lou Orthey remarked, "Eileen doesn't dress, she costumes!" If such is the case, it's my mom's fault. On one occasion, she took me to a family reunion on my aunt and uncle's farm in a pink organdy dress with a frilly petticoat and patent leather Mary Jane shoes. In no time at all, I slipped and fell into a fresh cow flop and spent the remainder of the

day dressed in my cousin's overalls and climbing trees...much to the embarrassment of my mother.

When she realized that clothes alone weren't necessarily performing the desired transformation, I was enrolled in dance classes and spent every Saturday for the next eight years taking lessons in tap, ballet, hula, baton and acrobatics (now called gymnastics). I danced on early live television shows from WTTG in Washington, DC, but no one we knew had a TV set on which to watch me.

Our next-door neighbors bought one of the first front-loading Bendix automatic washing machines with a glass door, and all the neighborhood kids would sit on their cellar floor and watch that machine go through its cycles. Considering that the only thing we had seen prior to that were wringer washers, it was rather fascinating entertainment. Counting the number of cars on freight trains was also pretty high on our list of fun things to do, as were hopscotch, jump rope, jacks, hide and seek, and a ball game called SPUD.

When I was nine years old, an America On Wheels roller rink opened up in the nearby town of Bladensburg. My family didn't own a car until an aunt gave us her old blue '36 Packard when I was entering my teens. However, we had public transportation available to us in the form of both trolley cars and busses. The youngest of my three brothers took me to the Grand Opening of Bladensburg Arena, and we both came home begging our parents to let us join the roller skating club. Dave became a champion racer (not to be confused with roller derby), and I entered the wonderful world of figure skating. In those days, if you passed a series of proficiency tests at various levels, the club would sponsor you at the competitions. My Grandmother Florence von Werder, who was an accomplished seamstress, made my costumes on her treadle sewing machine, and then my mother would painstakingly sew on the sequins by hand. A figure skater at that time wasn't able to specialize in just one event as they do today. I skated simultaneously in Ladies Singles, Pairs and Dance competition. Perhaps the closest I've ever come to attaining my "fifteen minutes of fame" was in winning a silver medal in the U.S. Roller Skating Championships. I also portrayed the Sugar Plum Fairy in a Rollercoades production of The Nutcracker. Sadly, the arena was burned to the ground during an integration attempt. The next closest rink was in the District of Columbia and, with us not yet having a car, that was the end of my figure skating career. (By the way, I met my future husband at the roller rink when I was eleven and he was twelve.)

Meanwhile, one of the other families at the rink had taken me with them to a riding stable near the College Park campus of Maryland University. Despite my mother's ambitions for me to become either a prima ballerina or maybe one of the Rockettes, all I had ever really wanted to be was a cowgirl. My only experiences on real horses had been sitting on my Uncle Harry's Percherons, Bill and Queen, when he came in from plowing the fields. I often pretended that my bicycle was a horse and, more than once, was jerked to the ground when I lassoed the stop sign at the end of our road and then the bike failed to stop when I yelled "Whoa." I had also become a pretty good shot with my brother's Red Ryder BB gun so, by the time I began going to the stable on a regular basis, I was well on my way to attaining my goal of becoming the next Annie Oakley.

My folks didn't always have the extra \$1.50 each week for me to ride, nor the twenty cents for round trip bus fare to the stable. School meals were thirty cents back then, and it didn't take me long to figure out that, by skipping lunch and saving the money, I could ride. That scheme worked pretty well until an observant teacher noticed that I never had anything to eat and arranged for the Guidance Counselor to contact my parents about applying for the free lunch program. Suffice it to say that my backside was too sore that weekend to sit in a saddle! After that, I worked out a deal with the stable owner where I could ride an hour free for every six stalls that I cleaned. (With very few exceptions, I have been "mucking" out horse stalls twice a day ever since.) We had a club at the stable that, in honor of the proprietor, we named the Buddington Rough Riders. One of the girls I met there collected horse postcards, and traded me some of her duplicates for a bronze horse figurine I had won at the fireman's carnival. That was in 1953, and my collection now numbers just under 28,000 different postcards of horses. You guessed it--there's a club for that hobby, too, as well as a quarterly publication. And, yes, I have already contributed several articles to it.

When I was fourteen, my parents moved to a brand new home in the community of Adelphi, which was then semi-rural. Although we lived in a development, there were farms all around us and I was finally able to have a horse of my very own (a 17-hand Tennessee Walker with an insatiable appetite). My folks paid \$75 for the animal, with the understanding that his upkeep was my responsibility. So, I worked twenty hours a week in a 5 & 10 for sixty-five cents an hour all through high school in order to feed the horse and rent a stall and paddock for him on a nearby farm. My take home pay was \$11.70 a week, and the horse consumed \$10 of it (not counting the bales of hay and straw my brother and I confiscated from construction sites). Once in a while, I had enough money left over to buy myself a tube of lipstick or a pair of stockings. Unfortunately, between going to school and working, there wasn't a whole lot of time remaining to actually ride the horse. The barn was a mile or so from where I lived. Very early one Sunday morning, I was walking up the road to go riding and had some of my gear in a burlap sack. The police picked me up and took me back home...thinking that I was running away!

While in high school, I was on the majorette squad and thoroughly enjoyed marching in parades, performing at football games and going on an occasional trip with the school band. That's about as close as I came to ever having any music education...unless you count a short stint with an Arthur Godfrey ukulele that my cousin Barbara gave me. However, I did develop a good sense of timing and an appreciation of classical music between the dance lessons, figure skating, and time spent with the school marching band.

I graduated a year early, having skipped the second grade. As a business major, I never had to go looking for a job because the federal government sent recruiters to hire us right out of the secretarial classes. I chose the National Security Agency at Fort George G. Meade because other family members were already employed there and I could ride with them. Allen and I were married while still in our teens and rented an apartment for five years until, with the help of his sister and brother-in-law, we saved enough for the down payment on a little house. I truly thought I had died and gone to heaven when I got my own washer and dryer and no longer had to use the public laundry. Al was working several jobs in order to eventually open his own auto body shop. (It wasn't until 1969 that we began an association with Toyota that continues to this day.)

By 1962, we had two little girls and made the decision for me to stay home and be a full-time mother until they were of school age. I typed lesson plans and book manuscripts for some professors at Maryland University, and also clipped poodles and sold Tupperware in order to supplement our income. We bought a female Collie dog as our first family pet, and I was delegated to take her to obedience school. She graduated at the top of her class, which motivated me to go on to the next level. One thing led to another...and that fifty dollar runt-of-the-litter canine ended up being the Best in Show at the prestigious National Capital Kennel Club and was the number two obedience Collie in the nation in 1967 (not bad considering that the top dog was a stand in for Lassie...of TV and movie fame). In January of 1968, I was stricken with Rheumatic Fever and was pretty much bedridden for four months. The illness left me in such a weakened condition for the next two years that I never resumed training and showing dogs.

When our daughters were in elementary school, I worked as the Librarian there, which allowed me to be at home when they were. I was also a Room Mother and a Girl Scout leader for nine years. My initial introduction to the autoharp came when one of the girls was allowed to bring one home from school for the weekend. I recall that it was an Attaché model and, while I found the instrument fascinating, it was to be many years later before I would become an Autoharpoholic©.

My oldest brother played mandolin and harmonica in a bluegrass band, although it was referred to as "Hillbilly" music at the time. So, I had grown up exposed to what I consider to have been vintage Country & Western music. Jimmy Dean and his band, the Texas Wildcats (which included Roy Clark) played regularly at two venues near where I grew up called the Crossroads and the Dixie Pig.

My husband was also a fan of country music so, along with a co-worker of his (who was later to become a business partner until the man's death), we went to Constitution Hall in Washington to see a Johnny Cash show. Traveling with Johnny were the Statler Brothers and Maybelle Carter and her three daughters. It was Mother Maybelle who really "flipped the switch" for me regarding the autoharp. However, because she held it Appalachian Style, I didn't make the connection immediately that it was the same instrument my daughter had brought home from school, nor the one I had seen Pop Stoneman play on the Connie B. Gay shows in Washington. It was still to be another fifteen years before I acquired an autoharp.

When the girls were twelve and fourteen, Al and I sold our home in what was rapidly becoming a bad neighborhood in Prince George's County and moved to Kent Island...where we have been since 1974. For our first five months here, we lived in a motor home because the 160 year old farmhouse we bought was in need of major renovation. However, it obviously had potential and the location, smack dab on the Chesapeake Bay, was unsurpassed for what we had to spend. Besides, there was a barn on the premises and, at long last, the girls and I could keep horses on our own property and Al could do likewise with his boat.

The kids became members of the 4H Horse & Pony Club and also the Future Farmers of America. As a family, we joined the Jolly Circle Horse Club and were active for many years in horse shows and trail rides and participated in the Bicentennial Wagon Train during the summer of 1976. I quickly earned the President's Award for Physical Fitness in the Equestrian category.

Then, I enrolled in a Distance Riding Program sponsored by the Appaloosa Horse Club in Moscow, Idaho, and had nearly 3,000 hours logged in the saddle when my horse got sick and died in 1989. He was such a magnificent animal that I never even attempted to replace him, but we do still have the girls' old show horses on the place. (Update: Those two horses were laid to rest in May of 2001 at ages 29 and 30, and are buried together here on our farm. Santa Claus brought Eileen a yearling filly for Christmas that same year and, shortly thereafter, she adopted a retired harness racing mare as a companion for the filly.)

During my earlier years here on the Eastern Shore, I enrolled in night classes at Chesapeake College. Other activities included joining a dance team called the Queen Anne Cloggers. A horse-related back injury in the Fall of 1986 halted my days as a dancer. For many years, I also made hand-pieced quilts, and won a few ribbons with them at our Queen Anne's County Fair. About ten years ago I developed Rheumatoid Arthritis, so no longer have the dexterity needed to do fine needlework. (Diminishing eyesight hasn't helped matters either.)

After our girls left home to start families of their own, I thought perhaps it might not be too late to get that autoharp that had long been in the back of my mind. When St. Nicholas brought me an Oscar Schmidt 'harp for Christmas in 1983, I'm sure he had no inkling as to the Frankenstein that gift was about to create!

I'm not only left-handed, but also decidedly dyslexic. However, it only took me a few days to come to the conclusion that the lap top or table top style of playing the autoharp was "for the birds." After all, with the Annie Oakley phase more or less out of my system, I now aspired to be just like Mother Maybelle. Only I couldn't figure out how a southpaw could play the autoharp in the upright position? As a result, I made up my mind to learn to play with my right hand. It proved to be one of the best decisions I have ever made because I can pick up almost any 'harp and play it rather than being confined to a left-handed instrument. Having always lived in what is, for all practical purposes, a right-handed world, we lefties have been forced to become somewhat ambidextrous. For instance, there was no such thing as left-handed scissors when I was a child. If I wanted to cut something, I did it with my right hand. Period. I also spent all of my elementary school years sitting sideways because every one of the desks were designed for right-handed children. Without a doubt, we southpaws are the most unrecognized of all the minority groups.

Anyhow, shortly after getting my autoharp, a man who worked for my husband invited us to accompany him and his wife to a club called The Birchmire in Northern Virginia to see and hear an autoharp player by the name of Bryan Bowers. I was so musically illiterate that I didn't know the difference between the key of C, the C chord or the c note...let alone recognize the fact that Bryan's diatonic 'harps were on another plateau compared to my assembly line chromatic instrument. I only knew that I was totally blown away by the sound Bryan was producing. After the concert, he told me he would be teaching a class the following summer at Davis & Elkins College in West Virginia. I registered for the workshop, but had to cancel when my mother became ill. So, I struggled along on my own for another year with the Meg Peterson Complete Method book as my companion (Thanks Meg!).

My trip to Augusta in July of 1985 was the first time I had ever been away from home overnight alone and, by that time, I was the grandmother of three! For years my life often seemed to me like an endless routine of work and care-giving, and tedium had all but absorbed me. At long last, I had an opportunity to do something just for Eileen. My newly-declared independence was not very well received at first on the homefront, but I wasn't about to turn back...no matter what the consequences. I figured that I had raised my children to adulthood, taken care of my parents until the Lord called them home, and nearly killed myself trying to be a model homemaker. The time had come for me to spread my wings and fly solo once in a while.

Writing has always come easily to me. In school, I was routinely given A's in English, History and Journalism but was never an honor student after the eighth grade because my dyslexia caused me to be a total failure in the required math classes. (No great loss, as I've been out of school since 1958 and have yet to encounter a need for anything beyond the ability to balance my checkbook or divide a recipe in half.) Back in my dog training days, I wrote regular columns for both a regional and a national dog magazine. Likewise, I did quite a bit of horse-related writing and, through my long-time involvement with bluegrass music, have contributed freelance work to numerous music trade journals.

Although I was never officially connected with The Autoharpoholic magazine, I accepted a few writing assignments for Becky Blackley. Then, when Autoharp Quarterly came onto the scene, I was invited to join their staff where I served for two years as the Books and Recordings Editor, as well as being the author of a series of articles called The Band Played On. My association with that publication was terminated when a conflict of interest issue arose. Mary Ann Johnston subsequently filled my position and has since assumed Editorship of AQ. (Update: I rejoined the staff of AQ beginning with the November 2005 issue at the request of Mary Ann Johnston.)

If you read the cover story in the October/November 1999 AC (and shame on you if you didn't), you already know that I acquired the Clearinghouse from its founder, Joe Marlin Riggs of Charlotte, North Carolina. For my part, the publication evolved as an extension of a correspondence network that had expanded beyond my capacity to keep up with it. Every summer, I would make additional new friends-in-music at places like Augusta, and we would all promise to keep in touch. Before I knew it, I was writing letters to about seventy-five people. This, you understand, was well before e-mail and the Cyberpluckers. AC began as a two-page newsletter, photocopied at Kinko's and mailed to twenty-four people. With absolutely no advertising or solicitation it has grown, strictly by word of mouth, to a 28-32 page magazine with a circulation of more than seven hundred copies. Each issue has been somewhat of a birth process because, when it is completed, something is here that has never been here before. I have derived a tremendous sense of accomplishment and degree of satisfaction from doing something that can actually be completed...unlike cooking, cleaning and laundry...to which there is apparently no end.

To touch briefly on my musicianship, I will be the first to admit that I am no more than a mediocre autoharp player. I'm somewhat restricted by physical limitations but, more than that, I have spent far more time during the last decade writing about autoharps than I have devoted to practicing.

As a person with deep Christian convictions, my primary involvement with the instrument has been in conjunction with Music Ministry. In addition to regularly playing for worship services at various churches, I have shared my modest talents with Sunday School classes, bible study groups, Vacation Bible School and visitations to shut ins, as well as countless trips to nursing homes and other extended-care facilities. I have also done weddings, provided background music for civic functions and private parties, and taken part in memorial services when asked. I tend to think of my music as a spiritual aid to worship rather than a performance. I am also a charter member of the Capital 'Harpers autoharp club...an active group which just recently celebrated their ninth anniversary. (Update: the Capital 'Harpers are still "going strong in 2010.)

With all of that said, the time has come for me to bid you farewell...for this, my friends, is the final issue of the Autoharp Clearinghouse. This has not been a sudden turn of events, but rather one that has been looming on the horizon for the past year. No advance announcement was made because I knew that I would be deluged with pleas to continue, and the decision is final. There have been any number of contributing factors, which I shall attempt to address in no particular order. For starters, AC is well beyond being bankrupt. The publication was set up as a non-profit endeavor but, in ten years, I have never once managed to so much as break even. I've been subsidizing it with money that I acquired as an heir gift, but that is now gone and I can't justify using household funds to finance the magazine. Each monthly issue has required approximately eighty hours of my time, and I have neglected other aspects of my life in order to do it. Since the age of twelve, I have suffered from severe migraine headaches. In recent years, they have increased in both frequency and intensity, and I can't help but come to the conclusion that the stress of constantly facing a deadline might very well be the culprit.

Over the years, I have presented cover stories on just over one hundred personalities in the autoharp community...and I've about run out of prospects. If you haven't seen a particular player featured on the cover of AC, it is because they either declined my invitation, postponed indefinitely or failed to respond. No one has been intentionally omitted.

Another contributing cause to the demise of this publication is the Internet. While it's a wonderful forum and most of us wouldn't want to be without the Cyberpluckers and the Information Super-Highway, it has also significantly undermined small periodicals such as this one. During the last couple of years, it has become increasingly difficult for me to come up with news and information that hasn't already been broadcast to the four corners of the earth.

For those of you who are determined not to venture into Cyberspace, I leave you in the capable hands of Mary Ann Johnston and *Autoharp Quarterly*. In the unlikely event that you aren't already a subscriber to that fine magazine, send \$24 (USA), \$26 (Canada), \$28 (Europe), \$30 (Asia, Australia, New Zealand) to: Stonehill Productions, P.O. Box 336, New Manchester, WV 26056-0336. <[www.auoharpquarterly.com](http://www.auoharpquarterly.com)>

(AQ update: As of March 2009, health problems have forced Mary Ann to make the difficult decision to hand the reins of the publication over to Pete d'Aigle. Contact info follows:)

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For Autoharp Quarterly business, call the number above

or write: [aq@daigleharp.com](mailto:aq@daigleharp.com)

In closing, there are many to whom I owe my sincere gratitude for their contributions over the years on a continuing basis. Certainly no one has worked any harder in behalf of AC than Heidi Cerrigione, who has "computerized" the majority of the songs and tunes for me. Neal Walters has also done some computer work, as well as having reviewed several recordings a while back. From the onset, Dorothy Wagner unselfishly shared her musical arrangements, as have Charles Whitmer and Bob McQuillen. Tom Schroeder, Alan Mager, Bud Taylor and Michael King contributed both music and outstanding articles to the publication. Keith Young graciously allowed me to reprint autoharp-related features from his Notes-a-la-Mode newsletter. Special thanks are due to Becky Blackley and Nancy Nitchie for their expert advice and loyal support. The photography of Brian Symonds, Herral Long and Raymond Whiteway-Roberts have graced these pages repeatedly. One of AC's most unique features has been the marvelous work of artists Elizabeth Bukowsky, Sally Schneider and Nathan Sarvis (Nathan also shared some songs). To my friends Tootie Duncan and Ron Penix, I extend my appreciation for their having relieved me of the burden of doing the mailing labels all these years. Thanks also to my daughter Laurie Roys and our co-worker Joan Gordon for helping me with the mailing each month. I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge my husband, Al Roys, for his tolerance of this project and for all the times he ate carryout food instead of a home-cooked meal when I was facing a deadline. Last, but certainly not least, are all those among you too numerous to recognize individually who have contributed club news, field reports and recipes, as well as faithfully supporting AC with your financial donations.

Let me assure you that I am not quitting the autoharp, but rather just the magazine. If anything, I look forward to having more time in the future to devote to playing my 'harps and participating in autoharp-inclusive gatherings and events. I'll be doing quite a few autoharp "gigs" during the approaching holiday season, and have bookings through May of the coming year at churches and celebrations such as my community's annual Kent Island Days fair.

If I might make one final request, I would ask that you refrain from jumping immediately onto the Internet upon reading this, but rather wait a week or so until everyone has received their issue and heard the news from me instead of getting it via the Autoharp Grapevine. Thank you.

I'll be maintaining the same snail mail address (POB 398 Chester, MD 21619-0398 USA), as well as the e-mail connection <esroys@verizon.net>, and it is my wish that you folks will keep in touch. Please remember me kindly. Peace be with you. ER

### **2010 Update:**

Wherever appropriate, I have interspersed updates into the preceding profile. I will, however, add a few more things of possible interest. Mr. Roys and I attended my 50th High School Reunion this past August and, in mid November, celebrated our Golden Wedding Anniversary.

Our five young-adult grandchildren now range in age from twenty-two to almost thirty. In addition, our family has expanded to include five great-grandchildren. We still live on Kent Island, which is just off of Maryland's Eastern Shore in the Chesapeake Bay. The animal population here at Royaleen Farm includes two horses, two dogs and eight cats. I take care of all of them, which pretty much keeps me tired and out of trouble!

I continue to play my autoharps at church on a fairly regular basis. I'm on "standby," which means they can call me as late as the evening before in the event that a scheduled musician has to cancel. I keep about five or six instrumental medleys of three hymns each practiced for those occasions, which seem to be just about the right length for either the Prelude or Offertory. I find it easier to "stretch" a medley than a single hymn because the Offertory, in particular, can run longer depending upon how many are in attendance at the worship service. My experience has been that congregations prefer to hear familiar pieces of music as opposed to obscure ones.

Without a doubt, the greatest honor of my life has been to be deemed worthy of induction into the Autoharp Hall of Fame in 2007. It has been quite a journey since I hid in the stairwell during our class recital my first year at Augusta nearly a quarter of a century ago.

Visitors are still welcome to come and enjoy the Autoharp Museum. I do ask that you contact me first so that we might coordinate our schedules. In normal traffic, I'm about an hour's drive from either Washington, DC or Baltimore and two hours from Philadelphia..

The End